Tampering with Time

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Tampering with Time

by Palaserece

Summary

When Kyuubi was extracted from Uzumaki Naruto, it was the Nidaime Hokage that came up with an unconventional solution. An experimental reincarnation jutsu on Namikaze Minato and a one-way trip, with his Kurama, to the past.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Travelling Backward

"It's now or never." Tobirama's fingers blazed through a series of rapid-fire seals like the fate of the world depended on his speed. Truthfully, it did.

The sky looked almost infected by the far-reaching darkness staining the sky. Strands of grey and ominous crimson blossomed from the direction of the battlefield, distorting the sky with a tainted pallor. Madara's victory was nearly complete.

We're running out of time.

"Is this truly our best option?" He spoke the words quietly and without any real conviction. Minato Namikaze, Konoha's Yellow Flash was just as resigned—no, committed to this task as the rest of them. But the cost of such a venture was going to haunt him for the rest of his existence.

Tobirama shot him a withering look that would have sent a weaker man crashing to his knees. The Yondaime simply returned the derision in those scarlet eyes and gave a pointed look to Kakashi's maskless face. At one time, seeing his student without the covering would have been a blessing, but now he only felt defeated by the sight.

"Sensei, this is our last chance to change everything." Kakashi's reply tumbled Minato's argument like a house of cards. His old student looked utterly worn out and Minato itched to do something to comfort the exhausted man. Obito's presence had dealt more than just a physical blow to Kakashi, the emotional toll was plain to see from the dry tear tracks and the cracked tone of voice. "If Tobirama-sama is successful, you'll be able to change things, Sensei. You can save all of us. You can save Naruto. You can stop Madara and…."

You can do what I could not.

Kakashi did not have to say the words: Minato heard them all the same.

Minato was aware that his protests were feeble at best and unworthy of a Kage. With the end of the world inevitable, if there was even a slim chance of changing things, there was really nothing left to lose. After all, his son had already paid the ultimate price and their

hopes died with him. There had been no time to grieve, not with the Nidaime's abrupt appearance whisking himself and Kakashi far and away from the battlefield. Far and away from Naruto's last stand.

Minato felt his son's vibrant presence falter and Kurama murmur a denial—the Yang portion of the bijuu's chakra all but screaming in the back of Minato's mind. Through that connection, the former Hokage felt a keen sense of disbelief as he experienced his son's final, agonizing moments in slow motion. A fiery determination that was a painful reminder of just how much like Kushina their son was; Naruto was fighting the extraction process like someone possessed. Even when Minato sensed the Yang Chakra being ripped out of his son, he could still sense Naruto struggling desperately—never surrendering even as the connection between them was extinguished.

Naruto had died just like his namesake: refusing to give up.

"I wish you could go, Kakashi," he murmured futilely. Physical pain was meaningless in a reanimated body, but emotional turmoil made his tongue sluggish. "You deserved so much more out of life than what you had."

"I'm glad it's you, Sensei." Kakashi's tone was committed and relentless—a Hatake to the end. Wherever he was, Minato was sure that Sakumo must be proud of what an incredible man his son had become. "When you were around, I believed the impossible might have a place in reality and not just genjutsu. When I watched Naruto grow, I saw that same power. I believe that if anyone can save this twisted reality, it's the person I believed in most of all."

"Kakashi—" Minato's throat tightened with unfulfilled emotion as his student shattered the last of his reservations. Salty wetness stung his face and he almost laughed in spite of himself. Who knew a dead man could still cry?

"Don't cry, Sensei. My suffering will be over in a moment and then... I'll see you soon enough. Even if you'll be wearing a new face, you won't stop being the man I looked up to."

'The Hatake brat is right.'

The distinctive whisper of Kurama's input was flawlessly logical and would certainly have shocked the sandals off of the shinobi that classified bijuus as mindless rage monsters.

'Minato, if this works, we'll be able to put an end to Madara's

madness once and for all. If that's enough motivation for me, it's more than you could ask for.'

'When did you become so wise, Kurama?'

'Heh.'

"We're nearly out of time. Yondaime, is the Kyuubi prepared?"

'Tell that insolent Senju that I am prepared to power his jutsu.' Kurama hissed, malice aimed mercifully at Tobirama rather than himself as the hulking shadow stepped closer until the monstrous fox was directly behind him. 'I can't believe I'm helping the brother of that Shodai scum.'

'Thank you, Kurama.' None of this would have been possible without the fox's help and he would never be able to repay his partner for this opportunity. Minato placed a hand on one oversized paw in their shared mindscape, knowing Kurama could feel Minato's sincere gratitude. 'Without you, saving the world wouldn't be possible. Saving Naruto wouldn't be possible. You may protest all you like, but we both know you're doing this for me and not because of Madara. Thank you, my friend.'

Slit pupils stared him down wordlessly for a moment before the massive bijuu huffed in a characteristically dismissive manner before gathering enough chakra that made a bijuu-dama look like a flimsy e-ranked Academy jutsu. Awed by his partner's incredible display of power, Minato grinned foxily and was pleased when Kurama returned it with a toothy smirk of his own.

"He's ready." Minato acknowledged, disconnecting from the mindscape and blinking at the grim-faces of his predecessor and student.

"Sensei, take this." A pouch was abruptly shoved into his arms and it clinked in his hands as the contents rattled against each other. "A few kunai and tags, but it also has all the money I had with me and a few other things." Ah, sentimental keepsakes that Kakashi kept with him. Minato is unable to fully conceal his smile when a certain rectangular shaped object is felt in the pouch. Jiraiya-sensei, so fortunate that Kushina never discovered that you corrupted her Kashi-kun. "It isn't much, but if Nidaime-sama is correct, you'll need every last ryo."

"Thank you, Kakashi." Impulsively, he reached out and wrapped his old apprentice in a one-armed embrace. It took a

moment, but his old student's arms were around him squeezing him in what would have been a painful hold if sensation was not nullified by the reanimation. "No matter what has happened, I have always been and will always be proud of you. You've never been a disappointment."

Kakashi trembled momentarily and Minato squeezed his arm gently. The embrace lasted a fraction of a moment before Kakashi pulled back, but his former student looked resolved.

"We have a minute, perhaps less." As if shattering a genjutsu, the two jerked to attention with Tobirama motioning to the ground and Kakashi dropping down in front of him. Already, the Nidaime stood weaving a complex series signs and the ground around Minato began glowing as a sealing matrix lit up the glade.

"I'm ready." He couldn't save Kushina, but a better world for their son and for Konoha...that he could do.

Tobirama's dead eyes stared unblinking at him as he continued weaving signs and began speaking even as the ground shook beneath them.

"I mentioned to you earlier that this is a reincarnation jutsu accompanied by a time-travel component that your bijuu will control," Tobirama explained even as tendrils of chakra visibly outlined the Nidaime's body and highlighted the seal matrices. "Remember Yondaime, you will never be Namikaze Minato again, though you may retain your memories as such. Your body will that of both Senju and Hatake bloodline and even your chakra will change. Anything more will be for you alone to discover. Ready?"

"I am." Minato looked at the haggard face of his pupil for one last time and sighed once when the copy-nin eye-smiled for the last time. "I suppose this is goodbye."

"Go sensei. If anyone can save the world, it's you." There is unconditional conviction in those words and Minato felt his resolve harden as he nodded sharply.

"Go Yondaime. Defend the future of the next generation."

There was a cacophony of sound and a spinning torrent of red and white chakra exploded. Tobirama placed one chilly finger to his brow and lifted a kunai to Kakashi's chin.

Feeling a scream build in his throat, Minato was tugged into his mindspace and wrapped in a cocoon of red tails that blocked his vision; though unable to see, he heard the squelching choke of running blood and inhaled the tang of copper and salt.

'You don't want to remember him that way.' The fox's voice sounded grainy, almost tender. Either way, Minato has never been more thankful in his life for being spared from witnessing a death. Hold your breath and pray, kid.

There was a string of words and a light that surged outward bright enough to blind. Sensation returned with an accompanying pain that travelled along his body. From his toes to the top of his head, it felt like he was being scalded by fire.

Everything was flame and agony and he was helpless inside it, tethered only by Kurama's nonsensical whisperings. And then everything faded to black.

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A waifish figure was coated from head to toe in ash and grime wearing a long shirt that fell to the child's knees like a dress. Bare feet were covered in a light layer of dust, while a pair of adult sized shinobi sandals had been carelessly discarded in the trash bin half a step away. Exhausted eyes drank in the lively silhouettes of happy residents of Konoha from his niche in the alley. Civilians bartering between stalls, carefree children running, and the occasional hitai-ate amongst the throng. Perhaps the most obvious sign of success the was prominent Uchiha Crest on the backs of two retreating dark haired individuals.

Figures those bastards would be the first thing we see considering they just destroyed the world.

Hearing Kurama's voice was a relief. Never in his wildest dreams did Minato imagine befriending the ill-tempered bijuu after sealing it within the Death God's belly. But loneliness was a fickle creature and the two had rather quickly formed an uneasy alliance. A few years into their eternal sentence, Minato had worn the Kyuubi down until the time came that they fought, bonded, and finally became friends—even if Kurama refuted such close association. Still, Minato knew Kurama's rendition of tough love would be necessary if he was going to survive this new life.
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Not this world, Kurama. Not if we have anything to say about it.

Well said. You're a bit of a mess at the moment though. We'll need to do something about that.

Careful Kurama, you sound as if you're going soft.

Tch. It's hardly my fault your new appearance makes you look pathetic.

Is it really that bad?

Not that there was much he could do about it.

It'll take some getting used to. The Nidaime has quite the sense of humor.

Geez. Not foreboding at all...

Naruto died. Obito had been nothing more than a pawn. Madara became the Juubi Jinchuriki. The Allied Shinobi Forces failed. All that had been left was for Madara to mercifully tuck them away like children to bed and let his eternal genjutsu come to pass.

That world had ended, but Minato could do something. He could *still* do something.

Quit thinking so hard, brat. Go find something to wear. That Kakashi gave you his weapon pouch and the pitiful amount of ryo he had with him. So, go get some clothes before you freeze to death.

Kurama laid his head down and curled up into a gigantic ball in Minato's mindscape and it occurred to the once-kage that his long-time companion was well and truly spent and his chakra was limited.

Reaching out, he ran a soothing hand over the fox's fur and gently scratched at an ear with unfamiliar pale hands that were distressingly tiny.

Are you going to be alright?

Tch, hating you was so much simpler. Kurama mumbled, but there was no bite in his voice. Even a lingering fondness echoed in the ancient bijuu as he cracked a single red eye in his direction. You should know by now that my chakra recovers quickly compared with a human. So, quit worrying and go get some clothing and save enough for at least one meal. We're going to need it in that scrawny

body that fool made us.

I wonder what it means when you're the more rational of the two of us. Minato mused.

Thankfully the general layout of Konoha remained basically the same despite the Kyuubi attack years ago. Minato was able to navigate the streets without attracting more than an occasion glance and frown as people noted a small child's lack of shoes and decent clothing. Still, a civilian's notice was far better than attracting attention from the Uchiha Police Force or Anbu. Eventually they were going to notice his presence—it was rather inevitable—but Minato wanted to delay meeting with the Sandaime for as long as possible.

Finally, he slipped into a quaint little shinobi apparel store that Kushina had favored. With a little bit of stealth and a lot of luck, Minato avoided immediate notice and grabbed a few basics from the children's area including a pair of sandals that he desperately hoped would fit and charged into one of the changing stalls.

The convenient mirror was rather startling and Minato dropped the handful of clothing in shock. Tobirama had warned him that it might be a shock, but being told is not quite the same at seeing. Namikaze Minato was...not him. Not anymore.

Instead of golden blond spikes, his hair was long and smooth with thin, wavy bangs like the Shodai's but with Tobirama's distinctive silver coloring. Aside from the style of his hair, Minato felt like he was staring at a portrait of the Nidaime Hokage. Identical scarlet markings on each cheekbone and his chin, excessively pale skin, scarlet eyes. Fragile and tiny looking.

A small child.

"Hiruzen is going to take one look at me and he will hardly need the blood test," Minato muttered at the foreign face in the mirror. "But this is really going to take some getting used to."

Quit complaining. You're a Senju by blood now even if the circumstances are absurd. Now shut up and quit bothering me.

Edging away from his furry comrade, Minato hastily shucked the oversized shirt and slipped into a pair of plain black pants that were a little loose, but comfortable enough. The haori he grabbed was a dark navy. *'Boring!'* Kushina would have teased, but he would have just called them practical.

The blue sandals fit well enough even if they were a little loose and had a bit of extra space for his toes to grow into. Until he eventually settled things with Hiruzen, he may be skimping on money for a while anyway.

On the way out, he snagged a white coat that looked a lot like the one he used to wear to the Academy and quickly approached the register. The boy there was young and looked rather perplexed that such a young child was by himself and paying for his own clothing. But the clerk accepted the bulk of Kakashi's ryo all the same and Minato fled before the kid could ask questions.

With appropriate clothing, he drew far less attention which was a blessing. And now, Minato just had to find Naruto.

"Where are you?" he whispered thoughtfully, blissfully unaware of the funny looks shot his way as he walked by.

You're both about five years old probably. Kurama snorted. Where do you think he is? Where do most unruly humans go when they're small and unpleasant?

Next time you tell me not to bother you, remember this moment. Minato advised the half-awake demon who simply muttered a curse and fell silent.

Time out would have been the simple answer, but Minato was no fool even if he was inept with non-shinobi children. Most children would be running around playing, but Naruto probably never *had* friends at this point based on the limited information they were able to glean from the memory transfer.

It was not going to be that way this time around. Definitely not.

"Okay, so the park."

But which park? There were three different recreational playgrounds—at least there had been prior to his death. Hazarding a guess based on where he approximated Naruto's apartment to be and known ANBU patrol routes, Minato dashed through the streets toward the second largest park and hoped for the best.

The sun was a smothered presence hidden behind the clouds; with only a light breeze, it was an ideal day for children to be outdoors playing.

And suddenly the silver haired boy's breath caught: there he was. When Senju Tobirama had appeared at his side whispering about a way to fix things, Minato was not sure he had believed, but Naruto was here.

A few rambunctious youngsters played under the watchful eyes of their parents. All except a familiar blonde skulking around the periphery of the play area near the tree-line.

Naruto!

The shock of blond spikes was striking against a backdrop of green leaves. As Minato approached, his mouth morphed into a frown when he observed Naruto gaze longingly at the other children chasing each other with squeals of excitement. That loneliness twisted something inside like a kunai.

Oh Naruto... I am so sorry. I know that someday your Kurama will be your greatest comrade, but your mother was right. I can only hope to make it up to you now. Even though I will never be your father, I won't let you grow up alone this time. I promise, Naruto.

Approaching with renewed determination, Minato intentionally crunched a few leaves to prevent startling the blond. Worked like a charm. Naruto spun, froze, and suddenly sat upright looking so painfully hopeful that caused Minato to want to charge into his former office and scream and rant until he was blue in the face. It would do little good, but surely it would make him feel better. A little.

Instead Minato channeled his inner distress into action, stuck out his hand, and smiled crookedly.

"Hi, I'm Minato."

He almost cringed at the higher pitch of his voice, but managed a sort-of smile. It was almost as bad as Inoichi before a stint in T&I had reshaped the Yamanaka into a world-class interrogator. Oh well, he swallowed his pride. Going from twenty-five, to dead, and back to four was certainly outside the spectrum of normal.

"Would you like to play with me?"

When Naruto stared, looking utterly baffled, Minato almost panicked—maybe he did for a moment. The certainty that Naruto is going to say no. To reject him, spit in his face, and run or—

"You bet dattebayo!" A tanned, suspiciously gritty hand snagged his wrist and practically dragged him toward the group. "You want to play ninja! I'm Naruto by the way! Uzumaki Naruto! Let's go, Minato!"

"Hurry up, dattebane!"

Kushina...

That gaki is going to be more trouble than Kushina. The fox groused muzzily, obviously fighting sleep. You're going to have your hands full with that kid, Yondaime. Don't expect me to bail you out.

Get some rest, my friend. You've more than earned it and I think you can trust me not to get us killed for one night.

That remains to be seen. But I suppose there is not much choice. It will be a while before my chakra recovers. Don't be an idiot.

A wellspring of fondness filled the silver haired boy as the duo raced toward the central play structure. Yet the parents stirred instantly like a bunch of angered wasps; children were called off with dismayed cries and dirty looks were tossed in their direction to mark him as the culprit in ruining their fun.

Naruto's grip on his arm slackened and the eyes were shining a bit too brightly as he stumbled to a halt as the playground emptied. It was too much for Minato when the blond shot him a clearly expectant, resigned look.

Carefully walking toward the structure a few paces, stopped, mustered his enthusiasm and called out to Naruto.

"I've never played ninja before, Naruto-kun. Please teach me how, okay?"

"You got it Minato-chan!" Naruto burst past him with speed that put the shunshin to shame and burst into bubbly, hyperactive laughter. "I've never played before, but I've watched a lot! C'mon! Err...and say, Minato. Are you a girl?"

Kyuubi's mocking laughter did little to abate his expression that truly *must* resemble that look of horror when he had witnessed young Gai's unbreakable sunset jutsu. Naruto, totally unaware of his social blunder, just continued to rattle off an explanation accompanied

by exuberant hand motions that were *so* Uzumaki in nature that it would have been painful had he not been so gobsmacked.

"I don't care if you're a boy or girl. It's just, you have *really* long hair like some of the girls around the village." If Naruto had stopped there, Minato felt certain he could have retained his dignity. So much for that. "But your face is all pretty and cute too." Just...kill him now. Tobirama, why? "Although the markings on your face are kinda cool too. They aren't paint, are they?"

"I'm a boy!" he sputtered, tugging on his hair and wondering if he really looked that feminine. Kushina had called him girly and unreliable in his previous life, surely, he would grow into these new looks? Thank Kami that Kurama had truly fallen asleep or he would truly never have heard the end of this. "And the markings? As far as I know they're just part of me. Nothing special."

Unless you count being reincarnated into a new body after time-travel and a willing blood sacrifice. But he really, really did not want to bring up the fine print in this little equation.

"Cool! I was born with these and I think it just makes me look even more awesome!" Naruto crowed cheerily and gestured to the whisker markings on his cheeks before the blue eyes brighten comically with a glint of mischief. "Now, last one up is cold ramen!"

While he may no longer be the yellow flash, Tobirama Senju was no slouch when it came to dexterity: Minato Senju was just going to have to be faster than both. Pumping his legs hard, Minato rapidly caught up with Naruto and smirked cheerily as he passed the sputtering blond and launched himself up the side of the structure.

Naruto claimed he cheated, to which Minato replied that there is no fair play as a ninja but since he wasn't using chakra yet it was a moot point. Afterward, the blond spitfire chased him up the climbing ropes, across the monkey bars, and finally a truce was declared on the teeter totter much to their shared delight. Their "mission" took a series of crazy turns as Naruto proclaimed himself the team captain and Minato willingly submitted to his orders. Their team had to take over a dozen head first plunges down the slide to escape their enemies. They were forced to hide beneath a pile of leaves to ambush potential enemies and use sticks to replicate tossing kunai. Finally, the giggling pair ended up at the swing set where Naruto demonstrated incredible reflexes, for a child just a few months shy of five, by launching himself backward into the swing with a cheery whoop.

"This is so much fun!" Naruto hollered loud enough to wake the dead. Minato could care less if his eardrums suffered a bit of abuse. If someone deserved happiness, it was Uzumaki Naruto.

Not thinking twice, he ran up behind the giddy blonde and gave him a push. While it was difficult because his arms were stick-thin, the peals of laughter coming from Naruto made the effort well worth it. He sincerely doubted anyone had ever done something so simple for Naruto.

"Look how high I am, Minato!" the blond crowed victoriously as he pumped his legs hard into the air. "Yatta!"

"I see!" He called, slightly winded as he gave the other boy another hard push.

"Here I come!"

Before he could issue a protest, Uzumaki Naruto let go of the swing mid-air and tumbled gracelessly to the ground. Unable to do more than stare in horror, the blond miraculously diverted his head-first descent at the last possible second and landed on his bottom with a ridiculously triumphant expression.

That boy is going to be the death of me. Either he has an insane amount of luck or he's naturally talented. Who am I kidding, it has to be both.

"Now get on! I can push you now!" Naruto was already racing his direction, oblivious as a stump to the parental nightmare he had unwittingly inflicted on Minato. "Ready?"

"Thanks, Naruto-kun." Minato clambered onto the swing, approving of how solicitous the other boy was considering how stunted his social interaction must be. Instead of vigorously pushing, the Naruto's hands were astonishingly cautious and gentle. *Of course,* Minato thought bitterly. *He's never played with anyone and he is afraid of hurting me by accident.* And despite all this, friendly and considerate.

No doubt about it, Naruto was special in a way that was rarer than once in a lifetime.

"Why don't you tell me about yourself, Naruto?"

There was that perceivable tension in the air, before Naruto started rambling away like a dam had broken. Naruto pushed him,

Minato listened and occasionally squeezed in questions or comments. In the space of a few minutes, the blond had told him all about how he had his own 'super-cool' apartment and did not have to live in the awful orphanage anymore. Naruto liked the color orange and idolized the Yondaime—irony not lost on Minato who appreciated the sentiment even if the 'real' Minato Namikaze was trapped in the stomach of the Shinigami. The boy liked 'the old man' and the ramen vendors who were, according to Naruto, awesome and cooked 'the yummiest food in Konoha'.

In return, Minato shared some details with Naruto. He favored the color blue, but liked red too after seeing it on a very special girl; apparently his son could relate to that since he had seen a particularly special girl with cotton candy pink hair running around before. And yes, he had tried ramen but it had been a long time since he had it to which Naruto had been particularly horrified and vowed they would fix that.

They had both agreed that the ninja academy was their shared dream even if that still was quite a way to go before they started. Minato had quipped that it was a good thing they had practiced so hard today for school, to which Naruto had enthusiastically agreed.

"I'm going to be Hokage someday and then everyone will have to acknowledge me." Naruto voice was fueled by determination as he stretched a finger toward the faces of the Kage looming over the mountainside. "Jiji had better watch out because that hat is as good as mine!"

"Hokage huh?" The former Fire Shadow ruminated with amusement as he dropped off the swing and moved to fall onto the grass with a murmur of pleasure. Gosh, that felt good. Perhaps the Nara laziness *was* explainable. "Is that the only reason?"

"Err, whaddaya mean?" The blonde looked adorably confused as he plopped down on the grass next to him and twiddled with a blade of grass.

"If I wanted to become the Hokage," he explained indulgently while stretching his body languidly like a cat. "I would have to be the strongest ninja in the village so that I can protect Konoha and all of the people inside it. Especially the ones who are important to me."

"Protect everyone?" Naruto seemed to mull over the words as if tasting them before turning to look at him funny. "Like friends?"

"Like friends." He nodded solemnly, eyes blinking as his body became heavy with a weariness of youth and afternoon play.

"Then I'm going to be the strongest Hokage ever, Minato-chan!" He pretended not to hear the tacked-on suffix, but found himself smiling in spite of himself. "I'm going to protect everyone! Hokage-jiji, Teuchi and Ayami, and you too! Just you watch me!"

The future seemed unnaturally bright in that moment.

"I guess I'll have to work hard then so I can be an elite jounin and work for you," he teased and waggled his fingers in his friend's direction.

"Alright!" Naruto cheered and the grass whispered and crinkled as the blonde's sandal foot crushed it. "Konoha better watch out because we are gonna take it by storm!"

A moment later, Naruto's stomach growled and Minato snorted and reluctantly abandoned his cozy spot in the grass and dragged himself to his feet.

"I think the future Hokage better get himself something to eat." Minato said.

"Err, yeah." The blonde rubbed the back of his neck and grinned broadly but there was an obvious reluctance that Minato had difficulty pinpointing the reasoning behind.

"Do you want to eat?" He attempted gently.

"We could play more?" There is a note of desperation that seems so out of place in contrast to how the last pair of hours had gone.

Oh. Of course. Naruto must expect someone to whisk Minato off and never see him again.

"I'm pretty hungry too," Minato admits fairly easy because it was true. "Can I go with you to that ramen place you mentioned before? I don't have a lot of money, but I should have enough for dinner."

Naruto's enthusiasm returned full force and before he can muster a defense, his hand had been seized by the other boy and they are rocketing away from the playground at breakneck speeds. Even if

they are both of a similar, unimpressive stature, Naruto has no trouble dragging him along as if he is nothing but a ragdoll. Barely keeping his feet, he desperately fought to keep the insane pace as Naruto nearly bulldozed a few snarling civilians. It's a serious blow to his pride since his former reputation carried the title of 'fastest man in the world' and now it was a struggle to keep up with Naruto.

Minato is ever grateful when a familiar stand popped into view and he is abruptly dragged inside. Pointedly taking a stool, Minato perched upright as the blonde sat on his stool on his knees, deposited his elbows on the counter, and bellowed happily.

"Old man! I'm starving! You got any pork ramen for me?!"

The ramen vendor shook his head with a fond smile that was obviously used to the blonde's antics and waved a ladle in greeting.

"Good to see you, Naruto!" The booming voice cried before the man's attention shifted from Naruto to the Uchiha pale boy perched next to his number one customer. Teuchi has aged remarkably well and his ever-present smile is enough to thaw the ice around his heart that had come from Naruto's poor treatment. The ramen vendor had always been respectful and kind even before the Yondaime was emptying his wallet for Kushina's excessive cravings. It was nice to see some things never really changed. "And who is this with you tonight, kid?"

"Oi, this is my new, best friend Minato-chan!" The blonde boy gestured to Minato who smiled awkwardly at the introduction and waved slightly from his seat. "We played ninja today at the park and he told me that he had not had ramen in like...forever! So I brought him here to show him how awesome ramen is!"

"Good evening." He bowed lightly and swiping silvery bangs out of his eyes and simply taking Naruto's exuberance in stride. From a parental standpoint—even if he technically no longer qualified—the blond's behavior was enduring and incredibly sweet. "Naruto told me that you have the best ramen in Konoha."

"Our number one customer would be right too!" The old man reached out and ruffled Naruto's spiky locks fondly, to which the boy responded with a bashful grin. "Since it's your first time bringing a friend here, Naruto, your meals are on the house tonight!"

Brightening at the thought of saving his meager stash of ryo, Minato bowed again to the kindly ramen vendor. "Thank you so much.

I really don't know what to say, but thank you."

"My pleasure," the ramen vendor called as he retreated to a bubbling pot. "I'm just pleased to see Naruto bringing company tonight. I hope we'll see you two again. So, what'll it be, Minato-kun?"

"A pork ramen, please. And I'll definitely be back with Naruto if he doesn't mind the company."

"As if!" Naruto snapped a pair of chopsticks and literally vibrated in excitement. "We should come again tomorrow!"

"Alright boys, settling down and give me two minutes for those pork ramen, boys!" Teuchi called out over the clang and rattle of pans.

"He seems really nice," Minato confessed, leaning on his elbow on the counter and fighting a sudden bout of exhaustion.

"Teuchi and Ayame-chan are awesome! And once you taste this ramen you'll never eat anything else!"

"I don't know, Naruto-kun." Even tired, he is unable to resist poking the other boy. "Onigiri and dango are pretty nice too."

"No way are they better than ramen, dattebayo!" Minato chuckled softly as Naruto puffed up like an offended Bunta.

"I'm sure you're right," Minato expressed indulgently. After this, Minato will need to make plans with Naruto for tomorrow and find somewhere to crash for the night. Kurama is truly asleep and he can feel his own body calling for rest too. "I need to find somewhere to sleep tonight."

"What do you mean?" There is a note of maturity and suspicion lacing Naruto's voice and the former kage hardly fails to see the other boy studying him a bit too intently.

"I didn't mean to say that aloud." Scratching the back of his neck nervously, Minato pretended not to notice Teuchi eyeing him with concern from behind the counter. What is the matter with him? Well...the future had ended in disaster after all just a few hours before, perhaps he ought to give himself some slack. "Don't worry about me, Naruto. I'll be just fine. I'm not too bad at looking after myself."

"Are you like me?" For someone with little social interaction, Naruto could cut to the heart of the matter with relative ease.

"Well, I don't have parents anymore if that's what you mean," he replied uneasily, staring at the floor.

"But you just said you needed to find somewhere to sleep." Naruto persisted intensely, his readied chopsticks dropping to the counter forgotten.

"I—I can manage." What was he supposed to do in this situation? Rubbing his eyes blearily, he cursed his exhaustion and the young age of this new body. Kurama had nothing to spare leaving him on his own.

"Come with me!" The reply was so earnest that it broke Minato's heart.

"Naruto, I don't want to be a burden and I—"

"You wouldn't be!" The other boy smashed his argument to pieces before he could even finish his protest. "It'll be great! Come on, Minato-chan. I promise I'll be quiet and won't bug you and I—"

It figured. Here he was supposed to be taking care of Naruto and already this boy was trying to save him. Jiraiya-sensei, this boy really is going to change the world.

Heck with it. He threw his arms around Naruto's neck and hugged him firmly. Naruto was almost too shocked to respond, but managed to return the embrace awkwardly before tightening almost frantically.

"Thank you, Naruto. " He whispered softly, feeling the clumsy embrace tighten slightly. "You're going to be an amazing Hokage someday. You're already saving people."

"Your welcome, Minato-chan." There was a clear tremor in Naruto's reply but Minato pulled back and deliberately avoided noticing when the other boy hastily wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"Here you are boys!" Teuchi reappeared like a magician and deposited the steaming bowls with a flourish.

"Amazing!" Both stomachs growled in twin approval and all three of them laughed heartily.

"Itidakimasu!" They chorused together!

Chapter 2: Parks and Recreation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Minato got up with the dawn. Apparently old habits transcended peculiar reincarnation kinjutsus. Naruto snuffled into a pillow next to him, groped blindly for the blanket, and abruptly disappeared beneath the covers like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Exposure to the morning chill had the unfortunate side-effect of erasing lingering drowsiness. Smiling at the snoring lump fondly, Minato eased himself off the mattress, resolving to prepare breakfast and have a quick shower. After being dead for nearly two decades and stuck in the Shinigami's stomach, Minato figured he had earned the right to feel clean again. A few improvised stealth tactics later had the former Kage slipping soundlessly out of bed and tiptoeing out the door.

Latching the door silently, Minato's plans went up in smoke as he wandered around the small apartment common area.

When Naruto had dragged him to his apartment last night, the newest Senju had imagined himself prepared. Nasty looks: check. Rundown neighborhood, that was little more than a ghetto, with huddles of raggedly dressed people, and one too many rats: check. In his exhaustion, the former blond had been deceived. Minato scarcely remembered the struggle to climb the endless flights of stairs to the top of the complex. And it was Naruto who ushered him inside, where they both struggled out of their sandals. There had been no lights, leaving the two boys to fumble through the darkness mostly by feel, but Minato had been running on dregs and needed sleep badly. The last thing he remembered, was following Naruto to a small futon, where they both collapsed atop a shared pillow, before the lights went out and he could recall no more.

Now with a clear head, some much-needed rest, and a few rays of sunshine for light, Naruto's apartment was an appalling sight to behold. The apartment had the most basic of furnishings and all of it appeared to be second-hand. A threadbare couch that might have been beige at one time but was a greyish brown with a suspicious amount of stains. A tiny kitchen table with a pair of rickety chairs and little else to speak of. A quick foray into the kitchen and bathroom where scum and mould were rather apparent and little in the way of

cleaning supplies save a mostly full jug of bleach.

Aside from a few empty containers of instant ramen, there was little in the way of clutter or garbage to be disposed of, but that lead to precisely what distressed him the most. There were a pair of shelves in the living area, but nothing was on them. A five-year old child lived in this apartment, but who would have known that? Not a single book on the shelves, no pictures, no treasured possessions. Not a toy anywhere in sight. There was nothing for a child in this empty place.

How could this happen? How could anyone let this happen? How difficult would it be to dispatch an ANBU to pick up even a few things for Naruto? Namikaze Minato had always held Sarutobi Hiruzen in the highest of esteem, but seeing this perverse emptiness dredged up resentments he could not afford to entertain. This time around, Senju Minato was hardly going to be so forgiving.

Resolving to do something about the layers of filth coating Naruto's living conditions, the newest Senju set about getting organized. Scrounging up a pair of decently sized bowls, even if one might barely consider them serviceable, he filled them with hot water and soap and added some bleach to the second. With that in mind, Minato scoured the small bathroom until the unwashed scent vanished and the worst of the mould was scrubbed away. The rest would have to wait until he acquired better supplies.

The kitchen was an obstacle for height challenged individuals, such as himself, and the kitchen chairs looked frail enough that a little extra weight just may cause them to collapse which left...chakra.

Minato felt confident that his natural chakra reserves as a Senju would easily outpace what he had as a Namikaze. His new body and chakra had a noticeably different feel to that of his original chakra pool, but over time he believed it would come to feel more natural given an adjustment period. It was a standard misconception that young children were incapable of accessing their chakra. Kakashi was the prime example that these beliefs were misguided. The actual reason most students were unable to become shinobi at a young age had more to do with how much chakra they possessed rather than inability to use it. A ninja only able to perform two jutsus was a liability rather than an asset and so the precedent encouraged students to have a longer education in the Academy—outside of wartimes, of course.

Putting his hands together in the ram seal, Minato coaxed his

chakra into action. Like being hit by a livewire, chakra responded to his call much quicker than he anticipated: the Senju blood was certainly living up to its reputation. Enough chakra to serve a genin well was just passing through his chakra network. The chakra control would be difficult, but certainly far from impossible.

Knowing what success should feel like reaped its own rewards. It took a few poor attempts and a few false starts, but Minato tentatively managed a few steps up the wall before his lack of control sent him tumbling down. It was enough to get him to most of the high to reach areas if he wiped quickly, and he only earned a few bruises to his knees that should vanish in short order, even with Kurama mostly out of commission.

That task done and some of his energy depleted from the chakra exercises, he made for the bathroom for a little clean-up before attempting breakfast. Except the best laid plans do not always go according to plan; Minato stripped, climbed in the shower, and shrieked as frigid droplets of water grazed his skin.

"What's going on?!"

Minato watched from the crack in the shower curtain as the blond spitfire darted into the hallway. His poor son still looked half-asleep and perplexed while dragging a train of bedding behind him like some of the most 'interesting' kimonos Orochimaru had been known to wear.

"Whoa! It's all clean and stuff!" The blonde was looking around in shock, before turning toward him with a quizzical look that morphed into one of surprised pleasure. "Minato-chan! Err...what's wrong?"

"Is it cold like this all the time?" Minato had his back pressed against the scrubbed tiles, feeling goosebumps forming along his arms as he awkwardly folded his far too small hands over his chest as an additional barrier to the spray.

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't it be cold?"

Why wouldn't it be cold?

The lump returned to Minato's throat. Naruto was the picture of confusion, one arm adorably scratching his head and tilted in a perplexed manner that was so reminiscent of his mother in her Academy days.

Why wouldn't it be cold?

"Ah, I suppose I better wash quickly then. I'll be out in a flash!"

Smiling would make him more of a fraud than he already felt like, so Minato just glared at the spitting showerhead determinedly and stepped under the spray. Each droplet is cold and evoked far too many memories of bathing under waterfalls or rinsing blood off in glacier melt. Rushing through his shower, he managed to ring his long hair and scrub away the worst of the unwashed sensation before he hastily stepped out and dried himself off with a towel that Naruto must have put there for him.

That kid...I can't believe he is still so kind after everything.

Minato's clothing from yesterday was still mostly clean and so he dressed quickly to take his mind off the freezing shower. Fortunately, even Naruto has a comb, which allowed Minato to tame his hair. Studying his appearance in the cracked mirror, he noted his dejected expression.

I'm such a failure. My son has never even felt the warmth of a bath.

I'm starting to think you really are a sadist, Yondaime. I preferred you sleeping to this self-imposed misery. Quit being pathetic and think about how you're going to save the world. A little cold water isn't worth this amount of fuss.

This was never what I wanted for my son, Kurama. When I sealed your chakra inside him, I hoped that the village would tolerate him at least, but this is far beyond what I ever imagined. There is nothing good about this life. Kushina would despise me if she saw what our son is coping with.

Then why is it that your son became so powerful and earned so many friendships?

Minato blinked as their shared mindscape grew brighter and he was drawn in to where he was resting next to Kurama's enormous paws. The bijuu was stretched out with one of his tails flicking in irritation back and forth and a single eye narrowed on him.

Your son partnered with my other half. You know better than most what sort of person he had to become to accomplish a task of that magnitude. You haven't given up, have you?

'No,' he denied, dropping down so that he was eyelevel with Kyuubi's enormous pupil. 'I just feel that I have so much to make up for. When the masked man—no. When Obito, destroyed our lives that night, the future was set in motion. Now I've come back in time to make a better future for everyone. I just wish that I could have done things right the first time.'

You really piss me off. *A gargantuan nose slammed into his abdomen, knocking the breath out of him and leaving him sputtering in his mindscape.* ***You act like you're the one to blame when we really should be focusing on solving our problems. We're in this together from now on, Senju.***

Senju! Gah. It's going to take forever to get used to the sound of that. You truly are an amazing friend, Kurama. Thank you.

Tch, get going. It galls me to share a body with anyone related to that Shodai scum. *Minato was unable to resist leaning in to tease his large friend.*

Would you rather I was an Uchiha?

Joke about that again, I'll eat you. Friendship or no friendship. We clear?

Understood, Kurama-sensei.

You've got guts, gaki. I'll give you that. *The bijuu's laughter followed him all the way out.*

Taking a measured glance at the markings on his face, Minato raced to the kitchen. Before he arrived, his nose detected the smell of bubbling ramen—no doubt the instant kind.

Injecting a hearty dose of excitement into his voice was a simple matter.

Turning the corner, Minato was rather bemused by Naruto's obvious excitement. The table had four bowls of steaming ramen set on it and the blonde was standing next to his meal fidgeting from the effort it took to wait.

"Smells pretty good." Figuring action was once again the most assertive proof, he dropped into the chair across from the other boy and took a hearty taste. "I was really hungry this morning. Thank you very much, Naruto-kun."

"You bet! You're the one that cleaned up so it only seems fair that I can get breakfast ready."

The other boy flushed red like a tomato but his enthusiasm resurged with a vengeance and Minato watched in horror as history repeated itself. In under a minute, Naruto decimated his two bowls of instant ramen, going so far as to rub his stomach appreciatively.

Kushina...you've contaminated our son from beyond the grave...you must be very pleased with yourself right about now.

"Here, one is more than enough for me." Minato slid his second bowl in Naruto's direction while focusing on taking another measured sip of his broth. It was overly salty and the flavor was far from excellent, but it was warm and it dealt with the hunger pangs stirred by his cleaning free-for-all.

"You're sure?" Naruto was already poised over the bowl, but looked reluctant to just attack it.

"Positive." Waving his hand in ascent, he smiled into his noodles when the blond crowed victoriously and slurped the noodles like he was starving.

Taking the opportunity to clear the empty cups away, Minato tossed them out. A flicker of chakra drew him up short and the former Kage paused and extended his senses carefully. In his previous life, he had possessed a minor sensory aptitude, but nothing compared to the sensory prowess of Senju Tobirama. Yesterday he had been far too distracted to pay attention to the flickering chakra signatures, but today he would remedy that.

Unlike with regular jutsu, a sensor functioned by identifying chakra strands and following them back to their source. Shinobi could suppress their chakra while not performing techniques, but passive chakra flow was easily traceable. On pursuit squads, a precise sensor was worth a dozen heavy hitters for their ability to eliminate surprise assaults, discern attack strengths, and overall chakra levels in their opponents. In his new, untrained body, Minato had felt the use of chakra from individuals with matured reservoirs of chakra nearby. Following the strands like one might follow a strand of spider web, Minato counted approximately four chakra signatures poised west of Naruto's apartment. Close, but not too close. The distance was still difficult to gauge without further training, but Minato surmised to be an ANBU patrol.

You know…you probably could have just used this ability to find Naruto yesterday.

'I suppose you're right!' He pressed a finger into the bridge of his nose and sighed softly. 'But Naruto's chakra doesn't stick out like it did in the warzone. He definitely feels like a Jinchuriki but he isn't old enough for his chakra to stick out in a village this size unless an exceptional sensor was searching for him. And until I familiarize myself with my new skillset, I won't be able to consider my sensory skill very reliable. Like any talent, it must be honed or it's completely useless.'

You humans make things much more complicated than they need to be.

Minato accepted the derisive comment with a grain of salt and merely indulged his grumbly companion amiably. 'Perhaps so, but I imagine it's our capacity for growth that allows us to surpass our limitations. At least, that is what I would like to believe.'

"Say, Minato-chan, are you okay?" Blinking, the silver haired boy released his hold on his senses and nearly leapt out of his skin when he found himself practically nose to nose with the whiskered boy.

"Eh, sorry! I guess I got distracted." It was a lame response and he knew it so he brushed up some of his former diplomatic skills and tactfully changed the subject. "I hope you don't mind that I picked your apartment up. I felt it was the least I could do since you were generous enough to allow me to stay with you, Naruto-kun."

"Oh, it totally looks awesome!" The blonde fell for the tactic hook line and sinker; Minato sweat-dropped while the hyper blond gesticulated with a crazed, hyper leer—were people really dumb enough not to connect the dots to Kushina? "Say! Say! You want to go to the park again today and play ninja?! I dreamt up some totally amazing ideas for today, dattebayo! We could take turns being enemy shinobi or just go on an infiltration mission! Gah! There are just too many possibilities!"

That gaki gives me a headache just listening to him. *Kurama grumbled unhappily.* ***Makes me wish I was able to hibernate for a few years while you deal with this nonsense, Yondaime.***

Except we both know that you're curious about what your other half saw in Naruto. and I know that you're just as nervous as I am. We're on the clock and we don't have the luxury of pretending we don't know what's

coming. But trust me on this, my friend. We can spare a little time for fun. Just trust me.

No reply was forthcoming, but Kurama was never one to cater to emotions so it was hardly surprising. Instead, Minato nodded affably and gestured to the door.

"I would love to play with you again, Naruto-kun." There had been far too many missed milestones, but he could give his son today. "And maybe Ichiraku later?"

"Yatta!" The blonde cheered. "Let's go!"

Not again. Naruto flung Minato's sandals at his head. Luckily a few decades of reflexes translated well enough to avoid the hit. The second his feet were in his sandals, his hand was grabbed in a tight, sweaty palm and they were racing at breakneck speeds back to the same park from the previous night. Channeling just a touch of chakra to his legs, Minato evened out his pace and kept up much more easily with Naruto. Apparently the Uzumaki genes must have taken that as a challenge because Naruto sprinted even faster.

Ah. Minato detected a faint chakra burst that Naruto must have subconsciously used and simply grinned widely and followed suit, frustrating his son by keeping up so gamely. Uzumaki stamina really was something, but Senju stamina was revered for good reason too.

The park was deserted when the two of them arrived panting happily.

"Let's be an ANBU team again!"

"What are our orders, Taicho?" Minato quipped back, pleased to see Naruto puff up with pleasure.

"We're got to rescue a princess from the evil shinobi."

Evil of course, was a varied definition and could easily be assigned to almost anyone in the shinobi world when considered from differing perspectives. His own former reputation being the perfect example as revered as both a hero and genocidal murderer depending on what village you were in. But of course, Naruto would have a wake-up call sooner or later.

They played for several minutes until Minato sensed two

chakra signatures approaching from the periphery—too large to be a civilian but not particularly large. Dropping down, Minato felt his son following him faithfully.

"What's wrong, Minato?" There was an underlying tension that Minato recognized right away.

"I thought she might want to play with us." Minato felt the ruffled feathers ease but not entirely dissipate; again, he noted the reaction but refrained from acting. The last thing he wanted to do was alienate Naruto by implying the boy was weak.

The approaching duo were unmistakeably Hyuugas—eyes like those would give them away in any territory. A well-dressed young girl and what was unmistakeably her attendant. Hiashi's daughter if he had to guess.

"Good morning!" Well aware of Naruto nervously fidgeting at his back, Minato smiled and waved to the girl who had gasped and looked about ready to dash for cover. "Hyuuga-san. Would you care to join us for a game of ninja? We're pretending to be ANBU!"

"You want me to play with you?" The girl stammered lightly, clearly as surprised as Naruto had been the night before that someone *wanted* to be around her. What exactly had happened after he passed away? Surely *some* of the next generation had grown up in a stable environment?

"Sure!" Naruto had regained his own courage, stepping out and toward the startled blue-haired girl. "We were about to do the infiltration part. You wanna come?"

"Ano, I suppose if you want me to…" The girl spoke hesitantly, but her eyes looked increasingly hopeful and interested.

"Great! I'm Uzumaki Naruto!"

"Hyuuga Hinata."

The girl bowed and Minato quickly assessed the scowling attendant radiating loathing opening his mouth and smoothly interjected himself in the conversation before the tool could ruin a good moment.

"Nice to meet you, Hinata-san." He bowed, not exactly sure how he felt about the wave of silver hair that fell down around his

face. Raising his face for inspection, he took a sadistic amount of pleasure in seeing Hinata's chaperone lose all remaining color in his face. "My name is Senju Minato. Come join us."

You know the old monkey is going to hear about this today, Yondaime.

Minato unconsciously brushed a hand over his abdomen.

There's no help for it. With the ANBU detachment checking on Naruto, I had little hope of concealing my presence for any length of time. It was a foolish notion when I have no functioning skills to avoid detection at this time. Besides, this may just work out for the best after all.

Whatever you say gaki. They better not send a mind-walker in here though…I won't hesitate to deal with such an intrusion.

Understood, old friend.

The poor Hyuuga girl barely had time to attempt a reply before Naruto was on top of her and dragging her away. Minato spared a bemused moment to look at the slack-jawed chaperone, gaping after the pair in horror.

"If you don't close your mouth, you're going to catch flies, Hyuuga-san." He kept his tone as respectful as possible, even tacking on a polite smile just to infuriate the man.

Abandoning the sputtering adult, Minato sprinted toward where Naruto was hauling the heiress up the climbing wall.

"Whoever made you wear a kimono to the park is crazy!" Naruto chattered away, utterly oblivious to the mortified flush on the small girl's face. "How are you supposed to get *dirty?* Who thought that was a good plan?"

With another tug, Hinata was safely atop the structure shooting a fearful glance in the direction of her guardian while Naruto frowned cutely at her distress. *So cute.* Minato stood next to his scowling son with a supportive smile.

"Ano, Tou-sama believes that my appearance reflects upon the clan." The girl tugged on the sleeve of her kimono restlessly and her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper that was more of a confession. "I'm not supposed to get dirty."

"Well no offense, Hinata-chan, but your Tou-san sounds like a big teme!" Of course, Naruto just blurted out his opinion for the whole world to hear. Minato smothered a smile and a laugh when Hinata gasped and her guardian exclaimed loudly. "How are you supposed to have fun if you can't get dirty? Obviously, your dad just wants to try and look cool."

There was a spark in Naruto's eyes that Minato imagined would have resembled that special moment the Shodai first used Mokuton; alternatively, Naruto looked like Kushina when she had been inspired to prank half the village into begging for mercy. In both cases, there was amazing creativity and talent along with a swath of destruction.

Amazingly, the indignant Hyuuga's chakra signature suggested the man was rapidly retreating. Minato set the manner aside; if the Hyuuga was reporting his appearance to the Hokage, he had little control of the matter. All he could do now was wait.

"I'm sorry, Naruto-kun." The poor girl apologized and Minato winced. They were going to have to infuse some confidence into the poor thing or she was going to end up a stuttering mess.

"Don't be silly, Hinata-chan. Let's play! We were playing ANBU so what kind of ninja would you like to be?"

"Oh, well maybe a medic?" There was an ounce of backbone in the girl's tone that reassured the former Kage that the girl was not yet too far gone at this point.

"Medic?" The blatant confusion would not have been so bad if the expression did not have practically a thousand question marks hovering around his poor son.

Minato rolled his eyes as he called on years of patience garnered from putting up with Kakashi's overzealous attitude and Obito's—right, not going there.

"Ah, a shinobi with healing jutsu..." Hinata trailed off.

"Alright! Someone to fix us up after we pound some baddies!" There were literal stars beaming from his son's eyes and Minato bit back another laugh. "Okay, Minato-chan and I will get the bad guys! Let's go!"

"You got it, Taicho!" Minato called supportively, sprinting

after the blond, with Hinata surprisingly keeping up with an incredible show of dexterity, despite the restriction of the heavier kimono.

"Hai, Taicho!" At last, a shine of enthusiasm from the timid girl.

The trio ended up taking a headfirst dive down the slide, peels of boisterous laughter exploding like unexpected tags. They seized a few tree branches and the group scaled the seesaw as one unit and nimbly survived the inevitable tip to the far side. A quarter of an hour later had Hinata schooling the pair of them on the monkey bars with yet another incredible demonstration of athleticism.

Minato was truly having a goodtime. His son looked like he was bursting with happiness and Hinata had a look of abject joy that Minato rarely saw on any Hyuuga's face outside of Hizashi. There was a seed of something new growing in the pearly eyed girl and Minato had been a sensei long enough to see that the roots were already deep.

Again, he stilled for an instant when he sensed an incoming chakra presence—this time a significant one. Except when he saw exactly *who* it was, Minato barely stifled a gasp. Kurama was growling behind him, but the new Senju ignored his bijuu companion and slipped away from the others.

"Be right back guys."

Instead of waiting behind, Minato sensed the other two moving to follow him as he approached the incoming ebony haired trio.

"Hi, would you care to join us? We could use another person for our ANBU squad." Minato directed his greeting to the shortest of the group who looked, but his eyes skated to the surprised looking teens flanking a boy around his age. It had been a long time, but he would recognize Fugaku's son anywhere, and young Shisui's vibrant anti-Uchiha traits were equally unmistakeable. Perhaps it was his regained youth, but Minato was rather delighted when Itachi's stoic reputation when his gaze fell landed on the marks on the identifying marks on Minato's face.

"Ah, our Sasuke here is a bit of a grump!" Shisui ruffled Sasuke's ebony locks affectionately and the stony-eyed boy jerked away with an annoyed glare. The older genius of the Uchiha Clan shot Minato an apologetic smile as he made a cursory sweep of both

Naruto and Hinata while projecting nothing except a relaxed, lazy mood. Color him impressed, there was definitely a fine infiltration and tactical expert in this youth.

"I wanted to train with Nii-san today." the young boy, Sasuke, grumbled while shooting a glare at Itachi who was once again completely devoid of expression even if his eyes had narrowed in what the former kage knew was a calculated move. "But since I'm already here, I suppose I could play a bit."

The boy skirted over Hinata's eyes before pausing and looking to his brother for confirmation.

"You don't have play with us if you don't want to!" Naruto puffed up like an offended pigeon. "We don't need you!"

"I think it would be nice if Uchiha-san wants to play with us." Hinata spoke up timidly. "I..I've found today very enjoyable and I believe he would too if given the opportunity."

"Forming bonds with comrades is the first step to becoming an excellent shinobi, Sasuke." Itachi responded, only to poke his brother on the forehead with two fingers much to the pint-sized Uchiha's supreme displeasure. "You should join them."

"Hn."

"That's a traditional Uchiha greeting passed down from our dearly departed patriarch, Madara-sama!" Shisui winked at the group, causing Sasuke to redden in embarrassment and Naruto *and* Hinata to giggle softly. "I'm Shisui and this is my cousin, Itachi-san. And of course, you've already met little Scowly here."

If looks could kill, Shisui would be a smoldering pile of ash. Considering what pyromaniacs the Uchiha Clan tend to be, Shisui knew it as well since he merely edged half a step away from the enraged youngster.

"Wait!" Naruto looked startled and scratched his head absently. Minato felt his stomach fall in preparation for the worst. "Who is Madara again?"

"Dobe."

"What was that, teme?!" So this was the legendary friendship that inspired his son...it was like his students except these two might

still have a future ahead of them.

Before the next Great Shinobi War was started on the playground, the newest Senju stepped in to play peacemaker.

"Please don't fight. We should save that for enemies. I'm Senju Minato." He bowed his head slightly, not missing the exchange of glances from the two young shinobi over their heads.

Hinata's years of ingrained etiquette kicked in and she bowed much more respectfully than he had bothered with. "Hyuuga Hinata. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

Minato nudged Naruto's shoulder and he grunted lowly. "Uzumaki Naruto."

"Uchiha Sasuke." The other boy replied after a pointed look from his brother.

"Perhaps Sasuke could be our kenjutsu master," Minato threw that detail out there, drawing on what little he knew of the future boy to try and distract the group.

It appeared to work because Sasuke's attention was diverted and he genuinely looked interested.

"Kenjutsu?" Sasuke asked, shooting a look at his brother again who looked to simply be observing again with interest. "My clan tends to focus on genjutsu."

Hinata, bless her heart, was whispering in Naruto’s ear. When a look of sudden understanding crept over his face, Minato realized the girl had likely been explaining a concept to his son.

"Clans tend to have specializations that families develop over generations," Minato acknowledged, lost in memory of his own precious comrades and all that made them unique. "But every person can be unique within their clans and have talents to excel in some areas and not measure up in others. But being different does not signify failure, it just means that your talents are better suited to other pursuits."

The boy appeared to consider that and simply nodded and Minato felt slightly relieved the other boy had not been inclined to argue. "Kenjutsu then. Let's go."

"Where to Naruto-kun?" Minato called.

"The dobe is in charge?" Sasuke hollered, swinging himself up adeptly to the top of the tower.

"Shut it, teme!" Naruto fumed.

"Well, you all better watch out," Shisui cut into their little discussion, earning four surprised looks. "Because I'm giving you squirts five minutes to plan and then I'm coming after you. Not that any of you can possibly escape a chunin like me!"

The older nin's comment inspired identical looks of determination from all of them. Even Minato felt excited by the impromptu challenge and gestured for his new friends to gather around closer. The group looked unnaturally grim and it easily reaffirmed the notion that shinobi *could* be lethal from a young age. And here they were; a Senju, Uchiha, Uzumaki, *and* a Hyuuga working together to overcome a powerful foe. This was what the will of Fire was intended to represent and collectively, Minato saw the beginnings of true greatness in the simplicity of child's play.

"We need to prepare some traps." A chilling suggestion coming from the lone female of their squad, but both Sasuke and Naruto were nodding in agreement.

"Tou-san has not taught me to do much with traps yet," Sasuke grimaced, apparently still comparing himself to his brother. A brother that Minato noticed had quietly slipped away when they had dropped into their huddle.

"I've never trapped, but I've tried out a couple pranks and they turned out pretty sweet." Naruto adopted a sinister look that had the Uchiha appraising him shrewdly.

"On who?"

"Lots of people," Naruto looked incredulous as if he could hardly fathom why anyone should receive a pass from his particular talent. "I've been pranking the Academy teachers so I'm prepared when I start. I even got the emo-sensei covered in paint."

Sasuke appeared begrudgingly impressed while Hinata looked torn between disapproval and amused, with the latter looking to be the winner.

"Four minutes!" Shisui sounded far too confident and even Minato wanted to put his intellect to the test and crush the Uchiha.

"Pranks are a good start, but do any of you have anything to set up a prank?" Minato inquired.

"I only have some ninja-wire I nicked from Aniki's room." Sasuke glared at the spool gloomily. "I haven't figured out how to work it and I doubt it would work on a Chunin anyway."

"I've got some soy sauce packets." Everyone stared at Naruto blankly as he waved the them around, digging into his shorts pocket. "And a piece of gum I was going to save for later."

Minato closed his eyes and thought for a moment before smirking broadly.

"I have the perfect plan. Now listen, this is what we're going to do."

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Sarutobi Hiruzen giggled, turning the page of Jiraiya's latest masterpiece. Above him, the ANBU shuddered in disbelief that their Hokage—the world renowned Kami of Shinobi—was salivating over pornography. The Kage Bunshin continued to give the bemused Kage hostile glares from over the nearly completed stack of paperwork, ominously muttering about the unfairness of it all.

A seal flared briefly near his door and the Hokage instantly dispelled his clone, replaced his book in his drawer, and executed a sealless Shunshin. The door swung open and the Sandaime smiled grandfatherly at one of leaf's most promising genin.

"Itachi-kun. I thought you were given the day off." While he may have had perverted tendencies that he indulged, Sarutobi Hiruzen was no fool and he could sense something off about the boy that had the potential to be his next successor. "What brings you to my office today?"

"Apologies, Hokage-sama, but it could not be helped."

A troubled statement that implied a dozen different possibilities and nothing all it once. It was premature to hope for good news with the Uchiha situation and it was equally naive to consider
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this a frivolous visit. No, whatever brought Itachi here today was something that would require his undivided attention should intervention necessitate itself.

"Leave us."

His ANBU were well-trained and they followed direction quickly and efficiently and Hiruzen took a moment to be pleased by Itachi's lack of surprise. Truly he prayed negotiations with the Uchiha were successful, for Itachi truly would be a Hokage worthy of the name.

"You have my attention, Itachi." The Sandaime deliberately dropped the use of honorific and rubbed his hands together. "Report."

"Hai." Itachi bowed. "Thirty minutes ago, Shisui and I took Sasuke to the Shodai Remembrance Park. On our way there, I noticed a Hyuuga branch member heading toward the Hyuuga Clan Residence behaving erratically. When we arrived, I discovered the Hyuuga heiress playing with Uzumaki Naruto and—" The Sandaime tensed at the name, hoping whatever had spooked Itachi was not merely his successor's legacy. "A child unmistakeably of Senju descent."

Whatever he had expected Itachi to report, it certainly was not this. Uchiha Itachi was *not* prone to being wrong, indeed the boy was a shoe-in for Chunin and likely ANBU within the next year. Exaggeration was not among the prodigy's skillset. But such a claim was...unfathomable.

"Explain your assessment." If his tone was a bit frosty, the Uchiha hardly seem offended and did not appear to bat so much as an eye.

"Hai, Hokage-sama." Itachi responded obediently and Hiruzen listened intently as the youth explained the silver hair, the pale complexion, the identical markings and eye coloration. And the exchange of introductions where the boy offered his name without blinking an eye. It was impossible and yet...the proof was waiting for him at that park. Taking a wistful glance at his nearly empty desk, the Kage pressed a hand to his brown.

"The ramifications of discovering a living descendent of Tobirama Senju are... beyond comprehension. Treat this as A-rank information and share this with no one."

Itachi nodded patiently while he scribbled a quick note and

called to the rooftop.

"Cougar, Duck." Instantly, the duo appeared kneeling in front of him awaiting instruction. "Have Inoichi and Shikaku meet me at the hospital. Go."

"Hai!" The ANBU vanished, racing off to take care of their respective jobs.

What a mess...and it was only a matter of time before Danzo became a pain in his side when this information went public. So much for reading.

"Itachi, you're with me."

"Hai, Hokage-sama."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to those that have taken the time to review. I don't get paid to write, but I always enjoy hearing what people like or don't like.

I am very much aware that the pairings have probably taken some people by surprise, but thank you to anyone that is giving this a chance anyway.

Take care everyone and thanks again!

Chapter 3: Meeting the Sandaime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sarutobi Hiruzen's chakra stood out like a flame in a dark room. It was warm with a potency that resonated of age and competence, while banishing shadows to the periphery. The Sandaime's chakra had appeared like a lightning strike within the ourskirts of Minato's sensory net. A shunshin naturally, but that meant his time was nearly up and the most demanding inquiry of his life was about to begin.

'I don't see why you don't just tell the Sandaime the truth.'

Kurama's voice called to him, but he stayed in the present and smirked meaningfully at the Uchiha on his knees oozing frustration. Kunai in hand, Shisui was muttering curses under his breath while attempting to hack away a wad of sticky gum from his hair. To Minato's joy, Shisui's task was hampered by a bouncing Naruto who was vibrating a little too close and had already caused the ebony haired teen to lose a few strands of hair. Pleased as pie, Sasuke leered as his cousin and basked in an air of superiority and triumph over his conquered relative. Hinata seemed to have forgotten about decorum for the moment since Naruto had pounded her on the back and congratulated her, leaving the girl with a silly smile that suited the adorable Hyuuga perfectly. Minato merely clasped the empty soy packets with a pleased grin: yep, he still had it even at four.

'Don't ignore me gaki!'

'I can't trust him because I'm not so sure I would have believed the truth if I had been the Hokage.' Fortunately, his response appeared to have shut down his quarrelsome bijuu; patiently he continued to explain all the while observing his friends. *'The life of a shinobi is full of battles, tests of character, loyalty, and strength; all of these are inevitable tests of character that every shinobi faces when they accept a hitai-ate. If it were a simple matter of convincing another shinobi of the truth, I would do so. Nothing is ever so simple, Kurama. The burden of a Kage is not for the weak nor the soft-hearted. To serve one's nation, a Kage must put aside their heart, their life, and their families if their village requires it. Therefore, Hiruzen is the one person that must never know simply because*

he is the Hokage. If I were to tell him the truth, there is a real possibility that he would have me killed or have you extracted which would result in my death.'

'I would never allow that.' Kurama's tone was dangerously protective and it warmed the Senju inside. It was hard to believe that his best friend had once been consumed by hatred and rage. Change had been a slow, coaxing process but it had been healing for both of them.

'I believe you, old friend. But my body it too weak at this point even with your help. You know that I may be capable of using a burst of your chakra, but no more. For now, I must provide enough truths to make a grand deception that is enough to sway not only Hiruzen...but Danzo. He is nearly as dangerous as Sarutobi-sama.'

'I don't like this plan, but you are a wordsmith, Minato. If someone can pull off your foolish plan, it would be you.'

'Kurama, it's not that bad!' He protested. In truth, he was confident because he was already so familiar with the Sandaime that Minato felt certain he would know what strings to pull.

'Not as much as your ridiculous names for jutsu, but it's a close call.'

The image of a disgusted Tobirama flooded his mind and Minato reflexively shuddered while Kurama cackled in the backdrop. *'Maybe I should just stick to letting you name things from now on.'*

"I'm never going to get it all out!" Shisui moaned, arms falling to his sides in an overdramatic melodrama Minato was far too-familiar with.

"Ano, perhaps I can assist you, Shisui-san." Hinata took a step closer.

"But you're the one that did this!" The Chunin whined while raking his fingers skillfully around the affected area. "You were like a cute little bunny! I never suspected you were secretly evil!"

Shisui turned and winked at Hinata exaggeratedly. Really, it was a relief that he did so otherwise Minato was positive the girl would have burst into tears. Thankfully the Uchiha was clever enough to think ahead, approving of the shy blush that cropped up on the Hyuuga's face. Unfortunately for Shisui, Naruto took offense on his

comrade's behalf and screamed at the top of his lungs directly into the Uchiha's ear--no doubt the poor guy would have a headache after that intimate encounter with his eardrums.

"What's the big deal you jerk! You're the one that declared war on us! You're lucky all you got was a bit of chewed gum in your hair! I saw Sasuke almost fry your ass with that fire jutsu." In reality, the Katon jutsu had barely singed the grass, but it was an impressive attempt for an untrained four year old and Sasuke owned the compliment like the peacock he was with an affirming grunt. "And we almost had you with the soy sauce!"

Shisui flinched, only for Sasuke to place a consoling hand on his cousin's shoulder, causing the older boy to pause and tilt his head to peer at Itachi's little brother curiously. "I no longer require lessons from you anymore. It's clear that my brother truly is the superior ninja between the two of you."

"I'm a Chunin." The protest was weak and watching Sasuke's eyes narrow like that, the boy was not buying what Shisui was selling.

"Irrelevant. Nii-san will be a Chunin soon enough and then it's only a matter of time before he surpasses a weakling like you!"

"You take that back!" Shisui barked, looking ready to lunge except a glint of metal stopped him dead in his tracks: Hinata holding the elder Uchiha's kunai an inch from Shisui's eye. Alright, Minato could admit to a failure...he had not even noticed the girl take it; reluctantly impressed, the Senju wondered if the girl had a future in stealth training. Perhaps Naruto would take her under his wing?

"Please hold still, Shisui-san." Hinata murmured, her other hand snaking out to secure the wet, squishy knot of dark hair in a firm grip. "I'm going to cut the gum out."

Preternatural stillness was a talent that every genin attained some skill in by the time they became Chunin. That or they died. It was unsettling watching a vibrant personality like Shisui suddenly freeze like a statue. The other two boys barely paid attention, but Minato was sure the shift in posture was the result of the duo that were now standing barely two meters away.

To his subordinates or the overly interested passerby, Sarutobi Hiruzen looked like a doting village leader taking in the antics of some of the youngest citizens. To Minato, an individual that had once held this man's trust and counsel, the Sandaime looked like a

man revisited by ghosts from the past. In a very real sense, Minato *was* the legacy of Tobirama Senju--the very same man that had sacrificed his life to ensure the future of the next generation. The very same man that had gone to his death after naming the young Sarutobi the next Hokage.

Hiruzen looked significantly older since their last meeting, but the eyes were sharp as ever taking in the scene with practiced assessment. The Hokage was intelligent enough to appear focused on the group, but Minato knew that he was dissecting everything from his appearance, clothing, to the children he was playing with. There was no hostility yet, Minato could work with that.

"You're going to have to get a haircut." Sasuke was doing a poor impersonation of his older brother's stoic mask, even sniggering slightly.

"He might look tougher if he shaved his head." Naruto snickered, both hands extending to prod the clump of dark hair. "This was the best prank ever!"

"What are you implying, Naruto-kun?! Eh!" Shisui pounced, tickling the startled blonde jinchuuriki. It was a pleasing thing to watch his son--no, his friend being tickled within an inch of his life while squealing with delight.

Hinata was clearly warring with her rigid upbringing and the good mood her friends were in, though Shisui and Naruto's laughter proved to be contagious and soon enough Sasuke, Minato, and Hinata were all giggling heartily.

Hiruzen chakra signature fluctuated between relaxed and tensed for action. If he had to guess, Minato felt sure the Sandaime was using the excuse of observing the group to stall. As a Hokage, if Minato had come across a scene like this, he would have been loath to interrupt even for duty. The sight of a young Uzumaki, a Hyuuga, and Uchiha, and a Senju playing together was unheard of in any generation. Poor Sandaime, the old man was probably having a coronary while they teased poor Shisui.

"Thank you for playing with us, Shisui-san. I'm certain you'll recover from the experience after your hair grows back." Minato, aware of the scrutiny from the sidelines, refused to bat an eyelash. Instead, he shot an earnest look at Shisui who nimbly regained his feet and only shrugged amiably.

"Ah you're all welcome squirts." The group of them suffered ruffled hair from the Uchiha boy, even Minato laughed and enjoyed the moment. Distantly he sensed another approaching chakra signature, but he dismissed it in favor of continuing to covertly watch Hiruzen spy on him from the sidelines. "But don't think you're all off the hook. You all better look out, I'm pretty fast on my feet and I won't be going easy on you next time!"

"Next time?" Naruto did not mask his astonishment as he leaned forward eagerly, earning a calculating look from Sasuke who narrowed his eyes slightly.

The Uchiha boy grunted, before turning to nod at Hinata before finally settling on Minato. "Hyuuga-san, Minato-san, we can meet up again at this park and play sometime. And if the dobe comes, I guess he can play too."

"Hey!" The outraged blonde shrieked. As a parent he would have been quietly amused, but as one of Naruto's friends, Minato just grinned widely and patted the scowling blonde lightly on the shoulder, feeling the boy relax a fraction even if the grumpy expression remained firmly in place.

"Sasuke-kun, you may call me, Hinata." Hinata still remained reserved, but there was a certain steadiness emerging in the girl. Hopefully at little more time with them would banish her shyness altogether. "I think it would be very nice if we could all be friends."

"I imagine your father would be pleased to hear you have made new friends, Hinata-sama."

A low voice that Minato had not heard in a long time called out from across the clearing as the revered branch member quietly crossed to where their collective group was. Shisui stood up, alert but still looking relaxed, while the group all turned toward the new voice. Allowing himself to appear curious, Minato took a moment to glance at each individual of the group. Hiashi's brother was identical to his twin save for the disgusting green seal displayed over the otherwise unmarred face; the man was looked at him once before turning back to Hinata with approval shining in his eyes. Itachi stood at Hiruzen's elbow silently exchanging some sort of coded conversation with Shisui. And Sarutobi was staring directly at him.

Rather than feel intimidated, Minato just smiled and canted his head to the side before deliberately refocusing on Hinata.

"Is that your Tou-san? Do you have to go home now?" Minato staged the appropriate inquiry and infused just a touch of disappointment into his voice. After all, it was not even time for lunch yet--the day was young!

"No." Hinata responded automatically, her chakra flickering with strands of collective anxiety. The girl looked determinedly down and scuffed her sandal on the ground. "I'm sorry for interrupting your day oji-sama."

"Hinata-sama does have to come home." Naruto looked utterly crestfallen and the Uchiha trio were unreadable as ever, but the Hyuuga branch member softened his tone somewhat and his gaze wandered to each child in turn before resting with a softened look to the girl that was all but cowering in front of him. "But I will make sure that she is permitted to play with you all whenever she has free time." Hinata's body jerked like livewire, her posture straightening and the boggled girl looking torn by disbelief and gratitude. "There is no hardship in coming to get you, Hinata-sama. In fact, I am pleased to see that she has made friends in untraditional places."

There was a pointed look from Hizashi to the Hokage while the old man simply smiled indulgently, a fraction of genuine approval in the Kage's demeanor. The older Uchiha boys may have concealed it well, but their wide eyes told everyone exactly how shocked they were by the announcement. Hinata's mouth opened and closed without emitting a sound, but no one more than Naruto who looked shaken to the core that someone would actually choose to allow their children to play with them.

"Well, that's good to hear." Minato clapped his hands together, breaking up the heavy atmosphere with a light grin. "I'm glad we'll get to play with you again, Hinata-san!"

"Yeah!" Naruto all but screamed, complete opposite of Sasuke's mute nod. Minato warmed inside to see how happy their friend looked. And it was barely noticeable, but the longer their little group interacted, the more relaxed the Hokage's chakra became. Instead of a maelstrom, there was an acute wind. A solid difference in Minato's humble opinion.

"It's not every day that a Hokage has the opportunity to see some of our upcoming shinobi at play." Hiruzen Sarutobi spoke with a gentle authority that hardly needed to be loud to command attention--Naruto really ought to take notes. The group turned to look at the

robed figure and Minato blocked out Sasuke asking if "the old geezer was actually the strongest ninja in the village. Hizashi had taken his place at Hinata's side and the pair bowed shortly.

"Jiji!" The group collectively flinched and staggered backward when Naruto shrieked and raced toward the Hokage, throwing decorum out the window. The Sandaime looked utterly unphased by the rambunctious blonde practically assaulting him in public and merely placed a gnarled, placating hand on Naruto's head."What are you doing here?! Are we gonna have ramen?! We haven't been in forever. Can my friends come, old man?"

"I must have eaten lunch with another boy last week then." Hiruzen chuckled slightly, before patting the blonde on the head. "But I always enjoy our time together, Naruto-kun. I promise that I will arrange for us to go out together soon."

"Tonight."

"Tomorrow night, Naruto-kun," the Hokage's tone was friendly but firm and the blonde sighed in defeat and Hiruzen squeezed the boy's shoulder in a show of affection that Naruto unconsciously leaned into. "But I see that you've made some friends. Would you like to introduce me?"

"Right!" Naruto grinned widely and skittered back toward where his friends were standing. The blonde slung an arm around Minato's shoulder, dragged an unwilling Uchiha by his shirt, and Hinata dashed ahead to avoid being bulldozed.

"So Jiji, this here is Hinata-chan!" Said girl flushed scarlet like she was willing herself to sink into the ground.

"Sasuke." The lack of honorific really said it all.

Naruto's voice dropped slightly from hyperactivity and said in a quieter voice. "And Minato-chan." Before the quiet exploded with a bit of tacked on, utterly unnecessary information that made Minato wish for a vacation to Iwa. "He's a boy."

Hinata blanched, Itachi twitched, Shisui choked on air and spectacularly failed at suppressing his giggles.

"Idiot!" A solid blow knocked the blonde off his feet and onto the ground clutching his hair and wailing like a kicked pup. For once, Minato did not sympathize with the squirming blonde. Sasuke

stood over the scene of the crime looking exceptionally crazed for a mere four year old. "Stop stating the obvious already!"

"How is it obvious?" Minato really, really wished he could just flash out of this situation and not because of the looming interrogation. "I really couldn't tell without asking!"

"Eh, that's pretty lame, gaki!" Shisui offered cheerily as he rubbed his patched spot of hair above his right ear. "Your poor friend looks like a tomato!"

'Ah Kushina, all I need is your temperament and I could retaliate freely. Alas, that particular ingredient was not part of this time travel fiasco.'

"I'm sorry, Minato." Naruto really did look properly horrified and nervous, which instantly expelled his embarrassment.

Knowing his son needed him, he wrapped his arms around Naruto's far too-thin body and vowed to do something about it after his interrogation--assuming all went according to plan. Minato felt the other boy tremble slightly before his arms mechanically moved to return the squeeze until finally the other boy was just holding on for dear life desperately. Beyond them, their audience was staring with differing reactions; the other kids both looked uncertain, Shisui had popped a camera out of nowhere and was taking a picture, and the Sandaime was observing with an aura of cautious optimism--still guarded, but a long way from going on the offensive. Minato simply accepted his task of soaking up the other boy's anxiety like a human sponge.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're my friend, Naruto."

"Me too." The words were infused with force cheer, likely to conceal the turmoil the other boy was experiencing.

'I'll always be here, my son. I will always protect you.'

'You can't think of him like that, gaki. This boy's father is still trapped in the Shinigami's stomach. That life is no longer your own.'

'I know. But this time...I'm not sure I can let go, Kurama.'

' You can't be a father to him, Minato. You can be his

friend.'

'I know.' He really did, even if he wanted to pretend otherwise.

When he pulled back, Minato deliberately flashed a grin to the other two children who returned the sentiment with their own personal flourishes; Hinata flushed pink and Sasuke smirked slightly.

"I'm very pleased to see that you have made new friends, Naruto-kun." The Sandaime said not unkindly, but strongly enough that Minato knew the Kage's patience was at an end. "But I'm afraid I need to borrow Minato-kun from you for a while."

"Is it because he doesn't have anybody looking after him?" Naruto questioned, frighteningly perceptive in that moment. Unbeknownst to Naruto, but Minato watched Hinata become rather flustered and Sasuke's fists ball. "Like me?"

Minato heard Hizashi whispering something to Hinata in hushed tones and Itachi had moved to place a restraining hand on Sasuke's shoulder. Four years old or not, but their friends were uncomfortable with the latest revelations. The world they lived in was not always fair and for sheltered clan children, this may be their first glimpse of the real world.

"You are certainly insightful Naruto-kun." The blonde perked up as if he had been showered in sunshine. Certainly there was no one better at shamming than Sarutobi Hiruzen; granted, nearly a lifetime leading Konoha just might have that effect. "I am indeed concerned for your friend's well-being. I'm going to have to take him with me until while we discuss his situation."

"Don't worry, Minato-chan!" The blonde Jinchuriki appeared in front of him consolingly. "Jiji is gonna take care of everything. He's the Hokage so he is a lot stronger than he looks." Minato sweat-dropped, uncertain what strength had to do with this equation. "And after that, you can come back to my apartment when you're done!"

So trusting. So naive. The young Senju wished he had such an excuse.

A heavy unyielding hand descended on Minato's shoulder and he tipped his head to stare at the Sandaime curiously.

"My name is Sarutobi Hiruzen and I'm the Hokage of Konohagakure no Sato." Minato felt the heat from the palm of his shoulder and the tickle of chakra testing his own lightly. The Sandaime's tone was light and Minato could tell that the warmth was not entirely fabricated. "I've been informed that by Itachi-san that your name is Minato is that right?"

It was a psychological tactic to ingratiate oneself with younger targets in order to ensure complicit behavior. Minato was more than familiar with the method, have employed it himself once or twice, so he prepared for it and ready to respond accordingly. Submitting easily would go far to alleviate certain suspicions which was something the Senju was banking on.

"Hai." Minato tilted his head up and smile guilelessly. "My name is Senju Minato. It's an honor to meet you." He deliberately turned his head to toward his group of friends, noting Naruto was the only one that looked entirely at ease with the situation. "Naruto-kun cannot come with me?"

A pleased glimmer stole over the Sandaime's face before his expression returned to a friendly neutral look.

"I'm afraid not, Minato-kun. But if all goes well, I can arrange for you to be reunited with him later." Hiruzen baited a carrot and Minato smirked inwardly in triumph before bobbing his head indulgently and even slipped in a disappointed sigh. "But Shisui-san will be coming with us."

"You're taking Gumhead-san! Why can't I go then?" Naruto flipped, turning and glaring at the Sandaime rebelliously. "I'm better company than that guy!"

"Hey!" Shisui protested, bopping Naruto on the head effortlessly with a flick of his hand. "I'm the coolest Uchiha you'll ever meet."

"More like most annoying." Sasuke muttered under his breath earning a fiery glare from his cousin, while Hinata hid a smile behind her hand.

"I don't mind. Shisui was nice enough to play with us so that is good enough for me." Minato stated, grinning when the older Uchiha proved his maturity and stuck his tongue out at a fuming Sasuke. though he turned from the Hyuugas to the Uchiha brothers and up to the Sandaime's hawkish gaze with an imploring look. "If it's

not an imposition, may Naruto-kun eat with you? There isn't anything to eat at his apartment and I'm worried he will get hungry."

The atmosphere became rather grim despite the sunny day and the Sandaime looked like he had aged another decade in a matter of moments. Naruto looked horrified and was shaking his head vigorously only to wilt when practically everyone inspected him as they might a bug.

"The dobe can eat with us." Sasuke announced to the shock of everyone, even Itachi gave his brother a subtle once over--probably looking for genjutsu. "Kaa-san won't mind. And Minato can join us later after he's done."

Hinata turned a pleading glance in Hizashi's direction who nodded slowly after mulling the matter over.

"Uzumaki-san is more than welcome to dine with the our family. I assure you that he will be welcome." Translation: no harm will befall him.

Naruto was frozen like a deer in the headlights, too shocked to move.

Itachi, gifted with intuition and the knowledge of tense clan relations, waited for a verdict from the Sandaime without a word.

"I am very pleased by the invitations from both your clans," there was a genuine sentiment in Hiruzen's tone and the man looked as if a tremendous weight had been freed from his shoulders. "This moment has been a long time in coming. Naruto, go with the Uchiha Clan." The uncertain disbelief on Itachi's face parroted by Shisui was a revelation of the fractured state of affairs in the village. Perhaps this event could be the start in mending that rift. A Kage could only hope. "And if the invite is extended, join the Hyuuga family another time."

"The invitation stands on any day you wish, Uzumaki-san." Hizashi acknowledged and Hinata looked frazzled with delight. "Our family will not turn away a hungry child."

Minato literally had to fight back a dubious glare toward Hizashi. While he trusted the branch member implicitly in his former life, Hiashi suffered a lot of pressure from the elders of the Hyuuga Clan. While the father in him wanted to be thankful, the former Yondaime was skeptical that the offer *could* be fulfilled. In any event, it was out of his hands.

"Thank you," Naruto mumbled, taking a few shaky steps to stand between Sasuke and Itachi. The shaken boy shot a shaky smile in his direction. "See you later, Minato."

"Very good," the Sandaime commented, cementing his grip on Minato's shoulder. "Shisui, let's go."

"See you later, Naruto-kun." He waved to the other boy just as the ground vanished and they reappeared in front of Konoha General.

"They aren't going to poke me are they?" A childhood worry crept up on the young Senju and he stopped flat, feeling somewhat queasy. The fear brought up an errant feeling or irrationality that he had difficulty mastering. "I don't like it."

"I'm afraid a blood test will be necessary."The Hokage obviously was attempting to be upfront and chivalrous, which he definitely appreciated. Unnoticed by himself, his reaction was scrutinized by both individuals and categorized as a normal response and diminished suspicion slightly. "And we're going to have to ask you some questions, Minato-kun."

Minato's heart sank as a memory of being under Tsunade's care while Jiraiya visited came back to haunt him. His mentor enraging his temperamental teammate before dashing off and leaving an irate Tsunade with his apprentice. A dozen 'necessary' and incredibly humiliating exams later bookmarked the event as one of the most mortifying in his life.

"Chin up, little silver." Out of nowhere, Minato was hoisted onto the Uchiha's shoulders and he reflexively wrapped his legs around the target and gripped the back of Shisui's dark shirt. "I'll stick with you the whole time. And Hokage-sama won't let them hurt you."

Oddly touched since his original background mirrored that of a lonely orphan, Minato felt at a loss of how to proceed. Growing up alone, Minato had not faced persecution like Naruto, but his pool of friends had not exactly expanded until after he became a genin. Touch was not something that he had familiarized himself with outside of killing and Kushina. Not even Jiraiya-sensei had been the touchy type outside of a solid punch--unless you counted the fairer sex. It was different--brotherly perhaps--and it was unexpectedly nice.

"Thank you, Shisui-san." Minato grinned, unable to resist bouncing a little bit on the shoulder supporting him, earning a sputter

from below as they stepped into the hospital and immediately turned down a corridor that Minato knew would lead to a restricted area. "Will you be staying too, Hokage-sama?"

"I will, Minato-kun." The Hokage responded amiably, though the shadows under the man's eyes suggested the Kage was more disturbed than he was letting on. Not...the most ideal beginning. "As pleased as I am to meet you, your appearance here is highly unusual and will require some answers."

Minato felt Shisui's grip tighten slightly on his ankles and the Senju fussed with the uncooperative tufts of ebony hair absently.

"I'll do my best to help," he offered it up like a child seeking a reward and Minato felt the briefest measure of success when the Sandaime offered one of his rare, genuine smiles in return.

"If you answer all of my questions honestly, I assure you that everything will go as smoothly as possible."

"I wasn't going to lie." He kept his face honest, ducking deftly to avoid a low hanging plant that Shisui almost ran him into.

"I'm very pleased to hear that." Yep, Hiruzen was using his approving voice. Definitely on the right track.

"See, little silver! The Hokage really is a nice old man! Not scary at all!"

Shisui really was a good egg. The older boy's attempts to keep his spirits up and obvious concern was...touching. A bit concerning for future infiltration and assassination missions, but Minato was pleased with how deeply the young man cared for a child he had just met. To be the focus of someone's protective impulses was certainly a change in nature.

"Do you suppose Sasuke-san has tried to turn Naruto-kun into a crisp?" Minato lead the conversation astray, playing upon his age.

Shisui's tension drain correlated with how relaxed he was and the Uchiha laughed aloud at that thought. "Forget that! My oba-san has probably trapped them both in a torturous genjutsu. She's brilliant with them! Only Itachi is more naturally talented among our clan with that art."

"She sounds scary! Will they really be okay?" Understatement of the century. Kushina was legendary across the nations for her temper, but she had nothing on her best friend's blow ups. Unlike his wife, Mikoto Uchiha possessed legendary patience, however, Minato had been unfortunate enough to witness the Uchiha matriarch's patience crack. It had not been a fun day for anyone, but especially for Fugaku. Needless to say, even Kushina had walked on eggshells if Mikoto showed signs of strain.

"Ah, what's the worst that could happen?" Shisui muttered, sounding unconvinced of his own argument.

They bypassed a few curious nurses before entering another zone labelled 'Authorized Personnel Only' while the Hokage listened to their chatter. Beyond the doors, one of the unlabelled observation rooms awaited with a medic waiting for them patiently.

"Hokage-sama." The woman, undoubtedly ANBU or former ANBU, bowed briskly before smiling faintly up at him. "You must be my patient."

"You're going to poke me." Minato did his best not to pout, though gauging by even the Sandaime's amused look, it was far from a successful effort. But he found he could not recall the lapse in composure when it yielded positive results.

"I am," the unnamed kunoichi acknowledged but her expression was kind. "But it will only be a small pain."

"Alrighty!" Shisui swung him off his shoulders and Minato mourned the loss of the extra height when he was right back to looking up at everyone. Before he had time to react, his hand was encased in larger one. Minato paused, glanced to their paired hands in surprise before turning to look up at Shisui who winked impishly at him. "I told you I'd stay with you, squirt! An Uchiha never breaks a promise!"

"Ahem," the Sandaime pointed to the room. "Head on in."

A plain examination room with an observation room behind one-way glass. No doubt Shikaku was one of the observers and while Minato had a short list of secondary subjects, he was not willing to play unfavorable odds guessing.

There was an examination bed lacking a stool. Minato walked toward it and found the tip of his nose even with the top of

the mattress. Before he could attempt to clamber up, Shisui was behind him again, boosting him up. While he would have preferred Naruto's company, Shisui was friendly and nice and felt strangely like a safety net.

Though his disarming nature may be precisely the reason he was brought along on this venture. That and his Sharingan.

"Remember, no test results are to be recorded except on the file that you will hand to me when you are finished. All testing samples are to be destroyed at the completion of your exams. Am I clear?"

"Understood, Hokage-sama. I'll conduct the tests first and leave you the room." The medic spoke, moving toward him at receiving the nod from the Kage.

Look up. Look down. Ear checks. Foot checks--what was *that* about? Mouth swabs. A needle that he turned away from and sucked in a deep breath while Shisui murmured some funny story involving Sasuke, Itachi, and a hungry rabbit. The blood sample was collected and pocketed by the ANBU--though Minato knew they were doing a DNA comparison and even he was interested to find out exactly what they would discover. Tobirama had not exactly given him specifics so he would just have to roll with the punches on that end.

Finally they had him strip down to his underwear.

'*Here it comes, Kurama.*'

'Why were you consorting with that Uchiha?'

'Our lives are on the line and you're busy worrying about your feud with Madara?'

'I'm not going to concern myself with your petty little interview with the Sandaime. You try my patience with your endless quirks, but you are a capable strategist and not completely annoying. The only reason you're nervous like a little schoolgirl is because you are literally feeling your age. Except you and I both know that you are *not* four so quit pestering me with your moronic statements...but don't expect to get away without discussing that Uchiha.'

'You're still stuck on that?'

'I'm going to eat you someday, Senju.'

'Love you too, buddy. Love you too.'

The medic's diagnostic jutsu paused as it converged over the seal. Like a ripple in the water, inky black lines spread out and away from the centre of his belly. Shisui's breath caught in his throat and the medic made a low murmur. Instantly, the Sandaime had moved from his chair in the corner to hover directly over his exposed navel with a shrewd, calculating look.

"Hokage-sama...this is a seal, but I lack the skill to decipher this one's particular purpose." No kidding. Minato internally snorted. Fuinjutsu had been a dying art when Minato had drawn his first seal; despite the best of intentions, Minato had failed to instruct anyone, aside from Kakashi, on anything beyond the basics. Unless Jiraiya-sensei had taken on a new pupil, Minato did not anticipate seeing anyone versed in advanced Fuinjutsu. Except...

Shisui's fingers clenched his own in a silent show of support and he returned the squeeze.

"This is...this seal is active." Hiruzen's words were numb as the Sandaime's gnarled fingers trailed over his exposed skin, raising goosebumps as they went. Everyone considered Jiraiya-sensei the foremost Fuinjutsu expert, but the Sandaime's had not earned him the title "Professor" for lack of knowledge.

"Well, yeah." Minato shrugged his shoulders, hyper aware of the intense scrutiny his flippant reaction was likely to draw, but he just shrugged it off and rolled a piece of string between his fingers like the conversation was boring. "I'm a jinchuuriki."

There was an air of calculation obviously caught off-guard by the casual declaration.

"Kimiko-san, you're dismissed until you have the results of your tests prepared. What you have just heard is an S-rank secret. You know what that means."

"Hokage-sama." The medic responded formally and vanished just as silently.

"Shisui, your Sharingan if you will."

Kurama growled slightly, but Minato's willpower

suppressed any trace of demonic chakra from seeping into his chakra network. Instead, he cautiously stared into the red pupils with the perfect three tomoes.

"That looks cool." He said it because he had always thought so but saying so would have Fugaku to react like an offended peacock back in the day. Shisui though, seemed a little more casual.

"I suppose it does." Shisui was still smiling, but his posture had changed. Here was a shinobi.

"Minato." The Hokage had moved his chair so they were directly face to face. "I need to ask you some questions now. I need you to answer honestly. Do you understand?"

"Hai, Hokage-sama." He gave a resolute nod that the Hokage returned slightly.

The former Kage did not miss the subtle signal Shisui gave to the Sandaime.

It was a fascinating thing to watch Sarutobi Hiruzen think. Initially, the thinking was mechanical, like pieces of a cog spinning out possibilities in a logical concise manner. But when a wrench was thrown into the mix, thoughts became lightning quick, spinning through a dozen possible scenarios and weighing inevitable calculations and arriving at decisions. From the perspective of someone who had *been* a Kage once, the Senju had a tactical advantage going into this discussion.

Steering this conversation in a positive direction was absolutely crucial to succeeding. A little misdirection would go a long way. That in mind, Minato offered up some true and exciting commentary like one might offer a juicy steak to a predator.

"I suppose you want to know which bijuu I have." Minato shifted and scratched his leg, knowing the observers were watching everything he did and wanting to project the casual acceptance found only in the youngest children. "Well, I'm the Jinchuuriki for the Kyuubi. I'm not sure if that helps you very much."

Shisui blanched and the Sandaime's countenance adopted a sickly shade of grey like an aging corpse. Minato knew it was a risk putting such a large chunk of information out, but it was a decision that Minato felt would be necessary to create a plausible background for his new identity. Morsel by morsel, he would offer up tidbits and

let the Sandaime run with it.

The Sharingan was an incredibly effective lie-detector test when a person knew what to look for; the dojutsu being able to moderate external nuances and make determinations is what made them such excellent interrogators. And as he knew Shisui would, the Uchiha nodded slightly giving the old man unexpected news: the Sandaime knew that Minato was telling the truth. Even if such a truth was impossible. >

"Minato-kun," the Sandaime was incredibly serious with no trace of anything except a military leader in his demeanor. "While I believe that you believe this, your announcement is an impossibility due to circumstances only I am aware of. Can you explain yourself better?"

Glancing to Shisui in a childish move for reassurance, Minato waited for the Uchiha to behave as expected as was not disappointed when Shisui smiled and nodded, though it was inevitably a false reassurance.

"Everything is going to be alright, Minato-kun." The hypnotic quality was...almost frightening and possibly with a trace of genjutsu behind it. Either way, it would change nothing. Kurama was already actively monitoring his chakra network. "Just answer the Hokage's questions. The sooner we finish talking, the sooner you can get out of here, right?"

"I suppose so." Minato responded quietly, knowing he was still far from out of the woods. "There are a lot of things I don't know, but I'll tell you everything I can."

Projecting sincerity was easy because Minato truly was sincere--he just might withhold a few specific details.

"Very good, Minato-kun." The Sandaime's tone had morphed back into a coaxing, grandfatherly voice. "Just tell us what you know."

"Um, from what I was told, the Kyuubi's Yang chakra was sealed in a Jinchuuriki while the Yin chakra was sealed away somewhere else." While the Kage made no effort to confirm or deny his assertion, Minato knew the wily old monkey was very much aware that two sealings had occurred that night--though no one else should have realized that. "I was told someone named Orochimaru broke the seal."

Narrowed eyes. "How?" The voice was forceful, angry and stained with remnants of betrayal.

"I don't know." Because he truly, actually had no idea. Suspicions but nothing solid.

"Very well." The Sandaime's eyes closed and Minato knew the old man was burdened with the weight of his mistakes in that moment. "Please continue, Minato-kun."

Cheered by the fact that Hiruzen was softening up to him even if his chakra was flickering continuously like lightning in a bottle--probably Orochimaru's fault. The snake Sannin was a traitor though and the Senju had no sympathy for the snaky bastard. "I know someone else created me using some sort of reincarnation jutsu."

"Reincarnation jutsu?" The professor looked deeply disturbed by this, while Shisui just shifted uncomfortably out of his depth. "Was it Orochimaru then?"

He shook his head, still finding the long hair something of an adjustment. "No. The man who created and performed the technique is dead."

A safe answer that revealed next to nothing with the added benefit of being true. Tobirama Senju *was* dead. Edo Tensei did not alter that fact.

"Is there anything else you know about the jutsu?" Shisui spoke forcefully, much to the Kage's surprise who whipped around in Shisui's direction. Even Minato tilted his head questioningly, blatantly ignoring Kurama's rumblings in the background. "Anything you remember?"

"I know that someone aside from the jutsu's caster had to give up their life." Again, he sent a silent thank you to the fox for sparing him Kakashi's death. At the same time, he flashed an apologetic look toward stony-faced Hiruzen. "I don't really know much more than that. I wasn't really told all that much."

"Blood and seals, what else?" The question appeared not directed at anyone in particular since Hiruzen rose and was pacing the room. The Kage's pipe had seemingly appeared from thin air and the man lit the thing and stuck it in his mouth and puffed away as his mind worked at a furious rate.

Minato glanced at the clock and sighed when his stomach rumbled unpleasantly. Lunchtime was certainly over by now. If he had been out of here, Minato had considered splurging with the last of his money to buy them something healthier than ramen. Though, thinking of Naruto, he was sure the boy would have put up a fuss at missing a chance for lunch at Ichiraku.

The chair scraped the ground as Shisui rocked back on his heels, shooting him a crooked grin.

"You're doing great kiddo...this has just been a lot to dissect. Some of what you've said is...quite the surprise." Shisui looked far too encouraging and burned so strongly with the resilient compassion that made Konoha so strong. "Just bear with us a little longer. Okay, little silver?"

Minato frowned, unsure how he felt about the nickname, but he reasoned that it was probably better than being called a girl.

"I'm tough." Minato deadpanned.

Shisui burst out laughing and the Senju quickly followed suit, noting the Hokage had paused in his motions to watch them. The Sandaime had been ready for retirement when Minato Namikaze took the hat, Minato could see the weariness in the man's stature and a genuine readiness to be free of the burden of leadership. For now, there was nothing he could do but...on an impulse Minato climbed off the bed and stopped in front of the Hokage and gripped one of the old man's hands and squeezed. There was still strength in this man.

Hiruzen looked genuinely fond when he returned the gesture, going so far as to allow himself to be lead to the bed where they both sat together across from a stunned Uchiha.

"Did you actually have parents, Minato? Do you know who they were?"

Again, Minato disappointed the man with a shake of his head. "I've never known my parents. I've been told that I'm a Senju now...whatever else I am, I don't know."

"You look remarkably similar to my sensei, Tobirama Senju." The old man shared, staring at Minato's face but seeming to look past him into a memory. "If the jutsu you told us about works as I suspect it would, I'm guessing you are of his descent. If that's the case, I have no doubt you will have the potential to be an amazing shinobi

if that is the path you would like to follow. But there are a few more questions I need to ask, Minato-kun."

"I'll do my best."

"I could ask no more." Hiruzen chuckled, his eyes showing strain of heartache and the beginnings of something protective.

"Where are you from, Minato-kun?"

"I think the place I was from is gone," he confessed, doing his best to remain honest while still spinning a tale to suit his needs. He allowed some of the sadness he had felt at seeing the countless casualties strewn along the battlefront. So many names he did not even know. "The man sent me here by some sort of strange seal. He told me I would not see him again and used some sort of seal to send me here. There were bodies everywhere. I've never seen so many. There was nothing left, but I was saved."

"A transportation seal?" The Kage mused, lips persing in thought. "A descendent of *that* clan?"

Minato looked up at the old man helplessly knowing this was the most crucial moment of all. "Ever since I became a Jinchuuriki, I was sealed away and forgotten." The chakra in the room felt thicker with a furious intensity, but Minato had weathered far more terrifying storms than this. The Shinigami's stomach had been a nightmare even if it did win him Kurama's friendship. "I'm sorry I can't tell you much, but I have nothing except myself and my name. I don't have much to offer you, Hokage-sama. But please, don't send me back."

"You will not be going back." An idea had formed in Hiruzen's mind. Like a stone settling at the bottom of a stream, Hiruzen's eyes were dark with outrage. "The Senju are one of the founding clans of Konoha. Much like the Uchiha." Sarutobi nodded in Shisui's direction, Minato almost recoiling when he witnessed how utterly pissed off the boy looked. "From this day forward, you will be a citizen of Konoha."

"Thank you, sir!" Impulsively, Minato wrapped his arms around the surprisingly broad frame. The man stiffened, but rather quickly strong arms wrapped around his small frame and returned the gesture.

"It may take me some time to decide where to put you...but

there is one more thing I need to ask you, Minato." The Hokage pulled back, locking eyes with him.

"Of course." Why did he suddenly feel like the room had become so small as he became lost in the dark eyes.

"You said you were sent here. Were you told where you were going?"

"No." True again. Tobirama could only approximate and had nothing definitive to offer. It was a good bout of luck that landed him successfully in Konoha. "I think he was in a hurry because he made it sound like he did not have much time."

"I see." Minato highly doubted that, but he played along for the sake of things. "Why did you seek out Naruto?"

"I got clothes first," he muttered, knowing that his comment would be verified. "But...Naruto's chakra felt like mine."

The suspicion lifted like a cloud and the old man looked certainly more relaxed and more amused.

"You could sense him." The Sandaime stated more to himself, looking highly amused. "My sensei was an incredible sensory type...I should have guessed that you would inherit that from him."

A knock and the ANBU returned carrying a folder and looking incredibly unsettled.

"I ran the test results twice, Hokage-sama. I'm at a loss to explain them, but they will be as you see them."

"Dismissed." Just as quickly, the woman let herself out and the Hokage opened the file, eyes widening again before snapping the file shut.

"However improbable, these results definitely demonstrate the success of your reincarnation jutsu. Senju Minato indeed. I will make arrangements to have a relative of yours brought back into town. Also...it appears you're going to have an older brother...Minato-kun. Unfortunately he is out of the village at the moment but ."

"A brother?" His face must have looked absolutely bulldozed because Shisui snickered at him teasingly. What exactly had Tobirama done?

"According to these records, your two parents match the DNA of Senju Tobirama and Hatake Sakumo. Both were Kage level shinobi which possibly explains why they were the focus of the jutsu. Sakumo had a son, Kakashi, before he passed away. I will arrange for you to be introduced when he returns."

"So...can I stay with Naruto then?" He kept himself hopeful, noting the increasingly indulgent mood of Hiruzen.

"Actually," there was a scheming, purposeful element lighting the Hokage's eye. "I think it would be best if Shisui took you home with him for now. I can think of no safer place than among the Uchiha. Is that not so, Shisui-kun?"

The chunin looked elated on one side and horrified on the other, but eventually he nodded stiffly.

"It'll be good. Fugaku-sama might just realize what a good thing having you around is." Shisui muttered.

"Can Naruto stay too?"

The room was dead silent again.

"Only if you promise not to discuss the similarity you sensed in your chakra with Naruto."

That was not a best case scenario, but Minato agreed to it anyway.

"I promise."

"Very good." The Hokage looked particularly pleased and reached out and placed a hand on Minato's head like a benediction. "I'm very pleased that you're here, Minato-kun. The Senju Clan has been missed."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," he dipped his head, squeaking when Shisui jerked him back to his feet.

"I can take him then?" There was palpable relief in the Uchiha's voice.

"You both may leave. But Shisui, you are to remain with him at all times." There was something dark in the old man's tone that reminded everyone exactly why the Sandaime was so feared among

the nations. "Am I understood?"

"O-of course!" The black haired boy ran a hand through his hair nervously, only to moan when he stumbled upon the crater of missing strands. "Let's go, Lil Silver."

"Wait."

"What is it?"

Minato gave the Chunin his best Kage stare, folded his brows, and crossed his arms. "I want to ride again."

"Ugh! Slavedriver!" the Uchiha whined, but complied just the same, boosting him up on his shoulders. "I thought you were cute, but Sasuke might pull out as a favorite!"

"Bye Hokage-sama!" He hollered just as they stepped outside the door. "Thank you for letting me stay! I like it here!"

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The Hokage's office was particularly quiet that afternoon. The Sandaime had issued an order to deny entrance to anyone short of an attack on the village and now the Nara and Yamanaka clan heads were digesting all that they had seen and heard. In a nutshell, today had become a classic case of troublesome.

The boy was the spitting image of his sensei. Bearing the family name of his predecessor and possessing half of the legacy of his fallen successor. And given the boy's appearance, any possibility of deflecting attention from his identity had little chance of success. In fact, Hiruzen was surprised his old friend was not breathing down his back already.

"So what do you think?" The Hokage inhaled deeply from his pipe, feeling like he had earned it considering all that had taken place.

"I think our intelligence division must have dropped the ball," Inoichi started the conversation, huffing over Shikaku's mutterings. "Before today, I would have said we had a fairly successful information network. We have agents inside nearly all the minor
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villages and even a successful informant in Suna and Kumo. Compile that with information provided by Jiraiya-sama, I felt comfortable with our level of intel. Except one of the shinobi world's greatest secrets was just discovered, unbeknownst to us, in the very heart of our village. Worse yet, we didn't have a clue he existed."

"Let's not forget to top off the involvement of one of our village's missing-nin." Shikaku shot him an openly disapproving look that the Hokage returned with his own steely glare. Enough regret had already gone into allowing Orochimaru to get away, but Hiruzen allowed Shikaku to get away with the disrespect for now. Enough cages had been rattled.

"That compounded with a wildcard fuinjutsu expert capable of using a reincarnation jutsu on top of resealing half the Kyuubi's chakra..." Inoichi swallowed and stood, showing tension through his upperbody. "I just don't know what to say, Hokage-sama. I feel more than a little out of my depth here."

"Shikaku." The Naru was tensed like taut ninja wire and merely nodded slightly. "Do you believe the boy is lying?"

"I'll be frank, Hokage-sama." Shikaku tugged a kunai free and stared it before replacing it in his supply pouch. "I do not believe the boy is lying, though I do believe he may possess more information than he revealed." Sarutobi nodded, that had been his assessment as well." I do believe he genuinely wants to be here and I'm impressed by how he responded to Uchiha Shisui."

"Hmph." Inoichi snorted, snapping his ponytail from side to side. Shikaku glared at his former squadmate with familiar impatience common to the Ino-Shika-Cho trio. Inoichi merely rolled his eyes before continuing. "I'm also of the opinion the boy is telling the truth. Now that I know what to look for, I can definitely confirm the presence of a bijuu inside him. If anything, I think we're lucky we picked him up when we did."

"While it's troublesome, I'm inclined to agree." Shikaku twiddled his fingers while staring at Hiruzen's empty shogi board with a look of pinched concentration. "The fact is, our information is limited. What we do know is that someone was more than likely looking to grab a jinchuuriki when the mind is still young and malleable. Minato definitely is a perfect age to be raised by any village and turned into a weapon."

Hiruzen's mouth formed a grim line.

"You believe whoever attacked Minato's location was after the bijuu?"

"That would be my opinion, Hokage-sama."

"Kumo or Iwa would fit that bill quite easily, Sandaime-sama." Inoichi volunteered, only for Shikaku to sit upright with a peculiar jerk.

"What is it?" Hiruzen demanded, voice clipped.

"Perhaps the seal master in question was a part of a group of Uzushio survivors...or former captives that were being hunted down." The room fell into uncomfortable silence as the possible implications mounted. If Kumo or Iwa had gleaned any critical seal intelligence they would certainly have the ability to do crippling damage with that intel. "This additionally provides potential cause behind this assault our young Senju detailed. I saw the look on his face and I believe he did witness some sort of massacre scenario. But Uzumaki fuinjutsu was feared for good reason, if any sizeable group were discovered still alive..."

The Sandaime closed his eyes in silent regret and took a long puff from his pipe. "They would be targets for slaughter. Very well then, we have a few different theories, all plausible, to work with."

"And unfortunately no point of origin to begin a new search." Shikaku rubbed his brow before smiling ruefully.

"That boy is going to be a target as soon as word gets out." Inoichi mused, expression oddly abnormally pessimistic even by Yamanaka terms.

"But as soon as word does get out, it may flush out some answers for us. And if anyone considers making an attempt for him, Konoha will be prepared." Hiruzen was aware he was radiating killing intent. Outside his office, the ANBU stirred like a hive of restless insects, but their loyalty kept them at bay even if they were disturbed.

"So..." Inoichi cautiously began speaking, able to ignore the killing intent for the most part even if the man certainly made an effort to select his words with care. "This will certainly be a boost to morale that our village needs."

Shikaku looked thoughtful and Sarutobi grimaced. Politics were an unpleasant aspect of running a military dictatorship, but the founding clan had become all but extinct so a new 'heir' would certainly be cause for celebration among both the civilian and shinobi populace.

"I can arrange for an ANBU detachment to shadow him." Shikaku offered, folding his arms tightly. "Whether we make the announcement or not, the boy is not just a Senju. As a Jinchuuriki he will be a village asset."

"The boy's destiny was no longer his own from the moment he drew his first breath." Hiruzen glanced to the portrait he seldom looked at of his stern faced predecessor and wondered what his sensei would think about the fate of his young clansmen. From a pragmatic perspective, he knew that Tobirama-sensei would have understood and approved, but...a daring glance at the kind-faced Shodai had Sarutobi closing his eyes for a moment in shame.

Forgive me, Hashirama-sama. This child of your line will be a symbol of our village and the will of fire that you believed in. Do not think me unfeeling, but I am Hokage now and I will do what I must.

"I intend to place him under the protection of the Uchiha Clan."

Inoichi sucked in a breath sharply and Shikaku stilled in the manner only a Nara could manage so perfectly.

"You risk much doing so." The Nara Head finally murmured. "There will be opposition to this decision."

"Understatement," Inoichi massaged his temples with a growl. "The Hyuugas are going to be a disaster."

"Considering how amiable Hizashi-san was when he met young Minato with Itachi's brother in attendance, I rather doubt the fallout will be as you imagine it." Sarutobi rubbed his hands together, mind firmly entrenched in a web of plots. "Hiashi and Fugaku share a mutual animosity--that fact is not in question. But his daughter was playing quite happily with Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and our Senju."

Again, the silenced overtook the room and the man revered as the Kami of Shinobi felt an ounce of illogical satisfaction at his accomplishment. The Hyuugas and the Uchiha were oil and water,

surpassing the notoriety of Madara's dissatisfaction with the Senju Clan. But together, the combination possibilities were endless.

"I see that you are already considering using Minato's position to reintegrate the Uchiha Clan back into the village." Shikaku confronted him boldly, extending a hand to place a closed fist on the Hokage's desk. "But there is a flaw in your plan, Hokage-sama."

"Speak then."

"That boy has a brother. Peculiar circumstances or not, Kakashi will have to raise him."

"Hatake-san is hardly stable enough to raise the boy," Inoichi snapped, drawing the stone-faced Nara up short. "I'm in charge of the psychological welfare of our shinobi and I can tell you right now that Hatake is far from over the death of Namikaze-sama. He is in no position to look after a goldfish let alone a four year old."

Something strange passed through the Nara's eyes and the Kage acknowledged that it would probably need to be addressed at some point.

"The Uchiha will be given charge of Naruto's protective detail with Itachi and Shisui keeping an unofficial eye on things. Most importantly, I'm recalling Jiraiya and Tsunade." Inoichi swallowed audibly and Shikaku nodded curtly in understanding after Hiruzen levelled a particular glare in his direction. "I may have to tell Naruto-kun about his tenant due to Minato, but I will not discuss the matter further."

"Tsunada-sama swore never to return..." Inoichi trailed off at the positively glacial look on his face.

"Tsunade will return or she will find herself a missing-nin. I intend to place Minato in her care; I know my student well enough to believe the comfort of family may be just the thing to help her." The Sandaime was pleased to see something like approval shine briefly in the Nara's eyes before the man's expression closed off. Inoichi merely looked troubled, but accepted it just the same. "Everything we have just discussed will be classed S-rank and to be discussed with absolutely no one for now. There will be a Council meeting tomorrow morning since it will be rather unavoidable and Danzo is certainly going to raise trouble. Inoichi-san, thank you for your time and your insight. You're dismissed for now."

"Anytime Hokage-sama," the man bowed, looking like he wanted to say something before turning and leaving.

The two remaining men waited quietly and the Hokage reached down, snagged two glasses from his drawer, and poured a couple glasses of sake. The Jounin Commander accepted the beverage with a grunt, downing it before turning to stare at the shogi board again.

"Orochimaru hmm?" Shikaku muttered, the village's greatest mind looking sharp like a finely kept kunai. "I've had a team in mind for some time now. All we need is solid intel on a location and I can prepare a kill team."

"I know that you never approved of my decision to let Orochimaru go." Admitting the truth was a bitter pill, but the youthful face of his favorite student was engrained upon his heart. The loss of his son had been painful, but that had been nothing compared to the sting of Orochimaru's betrayal. "Regardless, if this operation is to be successful and without so many numerous casualties, I need your help. This incident had helped me harden my resolve and I am prepared to do what is necessary--by my own hand if I must."

"Explanations are unneccesary, Hokage-sama." Shikaku looked up from his board with a wry smile. "But I am pleased that our village will finally have the opportunity to bring its greatest traitor to heel. And while I'm dubious about using the boy to settle tensions among the Uchiha, I think the existence of the opportunity is too good to pass up."

"Very well, then. Shikaku, you can go."

The man stood and walked toward the door at a deceptively casual pace before pausing.

"Hokage-sama."

"Hmm?" He puffed on his pipe, staring at the fading sunlight casting the last rays upon the sky.

"You should tell Uzumaki Naruto." Hiruzen sucked in a breath, feeling like it was just one more no-win scenario for the day.

"I'll consider it."

Nothing more was said. Soon enough, Hiruzen was alone

with his thoughts penning the first of more than a dozen missives due to go out. This one was special. A bit of chakra into a prepared scroll and one of Jiraiya's messenger toads appeared.

"Yo!"

"I need you to take something to Jiraiya."

"You got it Sandaime-sama!"

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so the chapter ended up way longer than I expected. Like...stupid long.

Anyway, please review. There isn't much point in writing without an audience, so please take a moment to leave feedback.

Thanks!

Chapter 4: Ripples make Waves

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Perfect!" The bun Mikoto was sampling made a pleasant crunch between her teeth. "Itachi better bring Sasuke-chan home in time for lunch."

Mikoto was not the clingy sort of mother that fussed over a little dirt or shadowed her children everywhere they went. While not as uptight as her increasingly moody husband, Mikoto did enforce a few family basics that were to be abided by with the exception of emergencies at the station for her husband or missions for her eldest.

Rule number one: you forget to take off your sandals, you're mopping the floor by yourself. Three year old Sasuke-chan had already experienced that particular joy; in fact, Mikoto had hung a visual, framed reminder of the subsequent meltdown on the wall for all of their family to see. Needless to say, her little Sasuke had never broken the rule again.

Rule number two: three meals a day. While attendance could not be mandatory in the world they lived in, Mikoto had been known to pop into Fugaku's office at work and give the man a verbal thrashing if he had not fed himself properly.

Rule number three: chores and homework must be completed before play. No issues there and no foreseeable problems in the future.

Rule number four: kunai must be placed where Sasuke cannot find them. One trip to the hospital was quite enough, thank you very much!

Humming lightly to herself, Mikoto did a rapid kunoichi style clean up of the kitchen. A little wall walking to dust a fixture, a quick-fix sharpening a few dull-edged kitchen knives, and a duster thrown with enough force to return it to its place in the upper cabinets.

Flicking away invisible particles of dust from her pink apron, the housewife's keen ears detected hints of laughter. Outside the walls of the Uchiha compound, such sounds were commonplace, but inside...most people were far too reserved and focused on emotional repression--there were days she contemplated pointing out that

emulating the Hyuugas lacked imagination, but she doubted the stuffy elders would validate her point of view.

Curiosity tickled, Mikoto executed a light shunshin and reappeared on the front steps. When she saw exactly *who* it was accompanying her sons, Mikoto's legs almost crumbled beneath her. The only thing that kept her on her feet was her pride and the voice in the back of her mind screaming that she was a jounin--albeit retired--of the village.

...Kushina...Kami...

Very few individuals remembered Uzumaki Kushina and fewer still would have tied the vivacious redhead to the proper, dignified wife of Uchiha Fugaku. Mikoto had never forgotten. As genin, they had shared the same sensei and the same dream. No one else would have worked so hard to draw out her laughter, but Kushina did. They had faced death together on the battlefield and come out victorious. Mikoto had even been told in a hushed, fearful whisper about her best friend's jinchuuriki status--that day had ended in shared tears and tight embraces. The day Mikoto went into labor with Itachi, Kushina had shoved her way into the delivery room, still covered in mission grime, and planted Fugaku faced-first into the ground with a well-timed fist after he had been foolish enough to stop her; needless to say, her best friend had been the second--after herself, of course--to hold her firstborn son. The war had kept them from seeing one another with any regularity, but Mikoto had been there the day Namikaze married her best friend and they remained close friends even when they only had the chance to catch up over lunch. Then October tenth arrived and her best friend was lost forever.

And now, seeing Naruto walking toward her, the Uchiha woman wondered how long it would take Kushina to come back and 'kick her ass' for not stepping up and doing *something.* The Sandaime's law had been the perfect excuse to pass the buck to someone else, while quietly promising herself to check up on him once the boy entered the Academy.

Mikoto had never noticed Naruto around the village personally, but with over thirty-thousand occupants, it was reasonable that she had not seen him. Of course, Naruto was only four so he would be living at an orphanage.

But in Mikoto's wildest dreams, she could never have prepared herself for how bad the boy's situation must be at only four years old.

Now, she was frozen like her feet had been nailed in place, watching a miniature version of the Yondaime bounce along next to her petulant son with Kushina's cheesy smile plastered from ear to ear across his face. Except the mother took a look at the sandals that were absent of tread, the threadbare shirt, and the hair that looked like it had never been introduced to a brush in all his life. Most notable of all was the thinness of his frame that fed the growing lump in her stomach.

Now Mikoto felt very lucky she had refrained from eating lunch. Throwing up was hardly going to improve the reality of this situation.

"Kaa-san!" Sasuke noticed her standing there and jogged up to greet her with a smile that was brutally suppressed. Boys, she thought, reaching out to place a kiss on Sasuke's silky, black hair--and steal a moment to prepare herself.

"Welcome home, Sasuke." Looking past her youngest, her eldest eyed her with a shocking level of suspicion that rapidly replaced with a blank, disinterested look. The prowess of her son at concealing his emotions was positively frightening and if she had been anyone else, they would have been fooled. "Itachi. Are you going to introduce me to our guest?"

A flicker of surprise appeared and vanished in the blink of an eye and Mikoto counted that as a success.

"Aa, I made some new friends at the park." Friends as in plural, interesting. Even more so that he had not volunteered additional information. "I told the dobe that he could eat lunch with us."

"Ha!" The blonde screeched at a truly frightening decibel that made the group collectively wince and a cat wailed from down the street. "You practically begged me to come you stuck up teme!"

Kushina-chan....definitely your gaki.

"Boys!" Mikoto called out in her most commanding tone. The two youngsters drew up short, staring at her quizzically. She crouched down in order to meet both their eyes and smiled softly. "No name calling, it isn't polite, ne?"

"Sorry?" Naruto scratched the back of his head sheepishly while Sasuke merely gave her an Uchiha "Hn."

Deciding to return to this lesson later, Mikoto took initiative and introduced herself.

"Naruto-kun, you may call me Mikoto-san, ok?" Feeling that was cleared up and needing a moment to hide and collect herself, she turned to head back inside only to pause and call to the boys. "Sandals at the door, boys. Itachi, make sure they wash up while I make up some plates for everyone."

Mikoto made quick work in the kitchen: it was her domain after all. She heard the boys come inside and slip into chairs. Taking a moment to consider, she only took three plates. There was no chance she was going to be able to eat right now.

"Sasuke, your house is really nice." Not much of a surprise there. "Is the water supposed to be warm when you wash your hands though?" Right. Wait. What?!

"The temperature of the water is purposefully higher in order to effectively eliminate germs." At least Itachi was clever enough not to question anything.

"Oh." There was a pause. "What's a germ?"

Oh, Kami. Out of self-preservation, she tuned out her eldest's response and bit her lip.

Mikoto slowly filled three identical cups of water, aware that her hands were a little shaky. Carefully, the mother carried in the drinks, and set them on the table to pass around. A quick trip back and she returned with a plate of vegetable wraps and her onigiri triangles and deposited them in front of each boy.

"Wow!" Naruto was literally drooling like a starving dog. "This looks amazing Mikoto-san."

"Thank you, Naruto-kun." She smiled faintly, somewhat enjoying the way the blonde's cheeks turned a bright pink despite the fact that her heart was racing far too past to be comfortable.

"Itidakimasu!" The chorus sang.

Mikoto hesitated, but finally dropped into a seat, nearly freezing in revulsion at the way the blonde was shovelling his food in his mouth. The blonde was consuming food the way someone might if they weren't certain when they would have the opportunity to eat

again--common during wartimes, but not so common anymore. The lack of manners, while distracting, particular to Sasuke who had abandoned all pretense of furtiveness and was openly staring aghast, might be explainable. Naruto was still quite young after all and growing up in a hostile environment had likely not been conducive to learning.

"Ah so," Mikoto spoke, making a note to pull the blonde aside for table manners someday. "Where do you live Naruto-kun?" There were three orphanages that she was aware of and she would certainly make sure he got home safely. And perhaps give whoever was in charge of the kitchen's a good tongue lashing for good measure.

"Jiji got me my own place close to the park." He grinned, exposing a deplorable amount of chewed food for all to see. "It's pretty nice."

"Your own place?" She parroted. Somewhere there had to be someone playing a practical joke on her. Or a really horrid genjutsu. Kushina's son was a mess!

"Hmm yeah," Naruto paused in eating, for which Mikoto was incredibly thankful for, and looked a bit uneasy. "People don't seem to like me much so they kicked me out of the orphanage."

"You're my age!" Sasuke looked particularly vicious, slamming his fist on the table. At any other moment, Mikoto would have reprimanded him, but she could not find the heart to do so when he was doing what she wanted to do. "They can't do that!"

"They did." Naruto's response was even quieter.

"Then it is rather fortunate that Naruto-kun has found a comrade in you, otouto." Itachi remarked quite calmly and logically. Sasuke stared at his brother uncomprehendingly while Naruto just looked like a startled animal unsure whether to stay or flee. "When one's comrades are facing daunting odds, what will you do Sasuke? Will you abandon them? Or will you choose to walk a different path and support your friends?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone," Sasuke retorted, looking rather cross. "Naruto is my friend and I don't really care what anyone thinks."

"Then my statement stands," Itachi remarked gravely, before sticking out two fingers and poking his little brother, earning a moue of displeasure for his action. "Naruto-kun is lucky to have you and by

turnabout, you are lucky to have Naruto as your friend."

Mikoto bit her lip.

Namikaze-sama, Kushina-chan, have I abandoned your son simply because it was the easy way out? I didn't want that to happen...but...perhaps I failed too.

"That's right dattebayo!" *Dattebane!* Mikoto was going to do better...she had to. "Say, how come your brother talks so weird, Sasuke?"

"You're the weird one, dobe." Naruto reddened like a tea kettle about to erupt! "And you're louder than Minato and Hinata combined."

Minato? Hinata? The first name automatically conjured an image of a smiling blonde who died with her best friend. Hinata...if she was not mistaken...that was a Hyuuga name.

"Sasuke made more than one friend today." Itachi offered, suggesting he really could read her face to an advanced degree. It was less informative than she would have hoped, but she let the matter slide for now. There were more important matters to attend to.

"How about we do some reading!" Mikoto clapped her hands together. Itachi, clever as a whip, disappeared to obtain the reading materials requested. Such a good boy.

Turning back to the boys, Sasuke looked resigned but not exactly disagreeable. Naruto...looked uncomfortable. Mother's intuition knew that something else was awry. They were both silent as she ushered them gently into the living room. Naruto looked afraid to touch anything and that twisted the knife just a little deeper in Mikoto's heart.

Itachi returned with a pile of reading materials and deliberately gave Sasuke 'the look." Her youngest grumbled, but inevitably settled on a cushion defiantly a seat away from his aniki. Naruto took a seat next to Sasuke but did not move to reach for a book.

Plucking one from the pile, Mikoto offered Naruto one of Sasuke's favorite stories about the ninja that rescued a daimyo's daughter.

"Here we are. Give this one a try, Naruto-kun."

Her smiled faded when Naruto went rigid, fingers squeezing the cover of the book but looking like he was going to his execution rather than reading a simple book.

"Is this one not looking good? We can always choose another if you like." She laughed gently, ruffling the tangled blonde strands gently. To her surprise, the boy leaned into the touch slightly before pulling away and looking at her with eyes that shined a smidge too much to be normal.

"Mikoto-sama...I...well, I mean..." Naruto began, staring at her with a helpless desperation that squeezed the breath from her body.

Oh no. This was...this seriously could not be right. Hiruzen would not *dare* to tolerate this sort of neglect. The fallen Hokage's son...her *best friend's son!*

"Naruto." Itachi must have sensed something in her voice because his pretense of reading vanished and he was staring in her direction like a tense line of ninja wire. "You haven't learned to read yet, have you?"

Voicing the confession must have been too difficult because the blonde vigorously shook his head and was doing his best to look anywhere but in her direction.

A fire was roaring to life inside the Uchiha matriarch's belly. The woman that had been one of her village's top kunoichi returned with a vengeance and determination. Heads were certainly going to roll tonight and the first one down would be her husband if he even voiced so much as a whisper of protest! Uchiha Mikoto had possibly more political clout than Fugaku because while the man was a jounin and would almost be guaranteed to win in a fair fight, Mikoto was far cleverer.

There was no making up for not checking up on Naruto sooner. If she had just opened her eyes instead of conforming to her role as the perfect housewife, perhaps things would be different. That no longer mattered. What mattered is that Mikoto refused to keep her head buried in the sand any longer and Uzumaki Naruto deserved better than to live in the sorry state of existence he was currently in.

There may be some concessions, but Mikoto was determined to get her way.

"Naruto," she used her not inconsiderable strength to hoist the

youngster onto her lap. To her surprise, Sasuke shifted so that he was sitting a little closer. The little blonde was frozen, but slowly she felt the poor thing relax against her. "How would you like to learn?"

The deafening cheer was worth the ringing in her ears simply to experience the rapture of a happy child in her arms. *This* was going to make all the hassle and the upcoming disagreements worth it.

From the opposite end of the couch, Mikoto never noticed Itachi observing her blankly nor did she note the slight upturned curve to her eldest's lips.

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"You enjoying yourself, squirt?" His leg was tapped lightly by a finger and Minato squirmed slightly. If he was ticklish, he certainly would not want a trickster like Shisui to know about it.

Rather enjoying the cool breeze after escaping the frying pan, Minato hummed in agreement. From his Uchiha perch, the Senju had a decent view and was able to enjoy the sights of some familiar individuals and many more new faces in the crowds. Businesses sporting new paint and the occasional familiar twinge of chakra.

When Minato concentrated, his sensory abilities extended like a web allowing him to identify the chakra signatures of individuals he was familiar with. Now, Shisui's signature was branded in his memory and Hiruzen's was rather unforgettable since the Hokage's dwarfed nearly that of everyone in the village. Of course Naruto and Sasuke were easy to discern a few blocks away.

'I can't believe you allowed that man to send us into this viper's nest!' An enraged bijuu was no laughing matter, but Minato had spent nearly two decades with his fickle friend so the air of menace around the fox did not fool him for an instant.

'Kurama, what would you have had me do? Tell him that you threatened to kill the lot of them? Somehow I think we would have ended up in a cell rather than released and placed into protective custody.'

'Except the ease of access that despicable clan will have when they decide to make their move.'

'It's not going to happen again. We're here to change all that.'
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'I'm not helping that filth. Do what you like, but mark my words, a single one of them flashes their Sharingan at me...I'll gut them.'

'Thank you, Kurama.'

"Will everyone be okay with me coming with you?" Minato asked, rather curious to hear what Shisui's response would be.

"Not to worry, little silver. The Hokage is going to have a chat with Fugaku-sama and let him know you're going to be staying with us." The sudden buildup of chakra in the Uchiha's body was his only warning before Shisui darted forward with a chakra enhanced leap. The chunin under him chuckled when his lax fingers tightened to a death grip around the high collar of the Uchiha clan shirt. "So sorry. I guess I must have forgotten to tell you to hold on tight."

Yeah, like Minato was about to believe that it just slipped his mind. Did normal children really fall for that?

"I don't want Naruto to stay by himself." Minato smirked when the hands holding his legs tightened slightly. "Can he stay too?"

"Not to worry." Shisui was quick to reassure him and the former Kage made a mental note to take advantage of the sympathetic tendencies. "Blondie can always crash on my sofa or bunk with us. It'll...it'll work out."

Shisui waved at a guard and Minato mimicked the gesture, rather pleased with himself when the man did a double-take and stared at the Senju boy with a confused look.

"Is there something wrong?" Minato asked Shisui innocently, well aware of exactly why the guard looked two-shades of pale from a stroke.

"Oh, it's just been a long time since a Senju gaki hung out with us Uchiha." Shisui laughed and deftly changed the subject. "Sasuke's house is right up there. You ready to go play with those two?"

Minato was aware of the hushed whispers coming from behind as a few clan members exchanged words. No doubt Shisui wanted to avoid a converging crowd as his pace had upped a notch until he was just below a jog.

The large clan head's home, that Minato was intimately

familiar with, came into view. Shisui tapped his ankles lightly.

"I'm going to shunshin to the backyard. I think the boys must be outside. Hang on, little silver."

Minato did, enjoying the thrill of the high speed motion that was too fast for his scarlet eyes to keep up with at this juncture. In a burst of green chakra, they reappeared at the back of the massive property, the sound of running water tickling Minato's ears. Shaking his ears to relieve the buzzing sensation, he caught sight of Itachi resealing some reading material out of the corner of his eye and approaching Shisui.

Waving slightly to the approaching Uchiha, Minato traced the sound of running water to his left. His friends were crouched next to a massive koi pond that was not shy on depth or width; Minato imagined it must have taken specialists in both doton and suiton ninjutsu and perhaps the green thumb of a Yamanaka to together such a massive landscaped area.

Naruto and Sasuke were oblivious to his arrival and the blonde looked two seconds away from diving in head first. Of course, such a mesmerising sea of such amazing creatures would be exciting for any child. That and the poor kid had probably never been allowed near anything like this in his short life.

"Wow Sasuke! I can't believe you have a fish pond in your back yard! I bet these guys make some tasty sushi rolls!" Sasuke snorted in disbelief and Minato almost face-planted in despair; of course Naruto would only see the prospective buffet instead of the aesthetics. He really ought to have known better by now. "Oh, let's catch one for your mom! I bet she'd appreciate the help!"

What? What?! Could Naruto even swim?!

"Naruto wait!" Minato shouted: too late.

The hyperactive knucklehead lunged at a speckled, scarlet fish. Shisui busted a gut laughing, Itachi sighed, and Sasuke dove forward to catch the back of Naruto's shirt. Too slow, the blonde's momentum somersaulted the pair over the rocky lip into the pond with a noisy splash.

Colorful fish scattered in all directions, but Minato was already moving. Taking advantage of Shisui's lax grip on his ankles, the Senju twisted like an eel and planted his feet on the sputtering

teen's shoulders. Treating Shisui like a springboard, Minato launched himself down and forward; the descent was not the Yondaime's typical, coordinated movements and his landing was far from graceful, but the Senju landed on his feet with only a light stagger before shooting forward toward the pond.

Vaguely he heard Itachi and Shisui speaking behind him, but Minato shoved that thought aside as he reached the pond's edge--just as the surface erupted to spit out two sodden youngsters. Algae strands were clinging in clumps to both of the boys' heads and Sasuke was furiously batting water out of his eyes and throwing off the lily pad clinging to his ebony locks.

"You moron! Look what you did!" Sasuke looked at Naruto like he had murdered his family right in front of him. "This pond is for decoration! We don't swim in this and we don't eat the fish either!"

"You're the one who pushed me!" Naruto choked, spitting out something that may have just hopped away. Minato swallowed and resolved *not* to mention this moment to Gamabunta-sama in the future. "And how the heck was I supposed to know that you don't eat these fish? Why would you want to have a bunch of fish that you don't eat anyway?"

"Um, Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun, I'm back!" Minato performed the smile and greet that had worked like a charm on many occasions with Kushina's friends.

The argument faltered and the boys both turned at his greeting, Naruto lighting up like the sun and Sasuke's anger quieting as he gave an awkward wave.

"Minato-chan!"

To his credit, the former Yondaime did not bat an eyelash this time at the honorific. Naruto was just trying to be affectionate and he would live with it. He would!

"It must be cold," Minato squatted down and extended his hand. "Let me help you guys get out."

"Not a chance, little silver." Shisui's voice was an ominous whisper from right next to ear. "This is for using me as a trampoline!"

The bottom of a sandal made contact with his rear and the Senju child shrieked as he was literally booted into the Uchiha's koi

pond. At the last moment, Minato managed to twist midair to avoid a belly flop but he still fell hard, hearing the outraged shrieks of his friends as the murky depths swallowed him up. Inevitably, the water was cool but not freezing but at least the pool was deep enough to prevent knocking himself senseless on the bottom. But within a second of landing, two pairs of arms grabbed him firmly and dragged him upward.

His eyes burned and he was thankful for the surprisingly sturdy hands holding him upright. Shisui was a dead man walking. Hacking up another lungful of water, he nearly went under again, but Sasuke and Naruto proved tiny could be mighty and stood strong.

"You alright, Minato?" Sasuke's voice had a soft inflection, reflecting the other boy's genuine concern.

"I'll live. Thanks for the rescue, guys." Minato mumbled, shaking the water free of his ears and shivering forcefully as the wind gusted. "I thought Shisui was nice, but I may have to rethink my opinion."

"Yeah, that gumhead is a real jerk. We're gonna have to get that guy good." Naruto's voice adopted a chilled, almost bloodthirsty tone that defied the fact that his lips were blue; and beyond that, Minato could have sworn he sensed mild killing intent emanating from the vengeful four year old.

"Don't worry." Apparently Sasuke had inherited some of Madara's more interesting personality quirks because Minato blanched slightly at the venomous glare aimed directly at Shisui. "We're going to take him down a peg. Maybe something a little more permanent than gum next time."

"Naruto-kun seems to have a very creative personality." Naruto puffed up and Minato carefully disengaged himself from their support, flicking the water with his finger. "He might have an unorthodox idea that we can put to good use."

It was a bit frightening. An Uchiha, an Uzumaki, and a Senju united together under a banner of vengeance. Somehow, Minato imagined this was not quite what Nidaime-sama had in mind about changing the future, but one could hardly question results.

"I know just the thing!" Naruto crowed, sloshing around a bit in the cloudy water. The blonde startled and bumped into Minato when some of the fish regained their courage and swam close enough

for their slimy bodies to tough them. "Eh, right! Paints?"

"I like it." Sasuke admitted, turning a nasty glare toward his supervising brother. "Are you going to warn him, nii-san?"

"No." Itachi replied blankly and spoke without turning. "Kaa-san, shall I bring towels?"

"Please." A motherly voice called out calmly.

It was his first time seeing Mikoto-san in a long time. While Kushina had been bright and flaming like the sun, Mikoto belonged to the hazy glow of moonlight. The elegant woman was unchanged with her dark flowing hair, unlined face, and the graceful motions of a kunoichi that had seen combat time and again and come out on top. The woman walked toward them with the grace of a panther and the former Kage was certain she was armed, though the matriarch had done an excellent job concealing that fact.

There was some indecipherable emotion in the woman's eyes that Minato did not feel confident speculating on. Mikoto definitely gave him a once over--as much as one could when confronted by a soaked child in a fish pond--before turning to look over Naruto and Sasuke each in turn, but lingered the longest on his son with a hardened sort of determination about her.

"Do I want to know how you three ended up in there?" Mikoto folded her hands, a mother's patience returning to the Uchiha woman.

"Ehehe," Naruto scrambled up and out, Sasuke on his heels. Instead of continuing, Sasuke paused and reached out and gripped Minato's hand, planted his feet, and helped pull him up. The grip was a bit suspect duty to the slime and water, but the Senju clambered out and flashed a wide grin at the solicitous Uchiha. Atypical behavior for a youngster, but definitely a sign of a good heart.

"Thank you, Sasuke-kun." The other boy's ears flushed pink and he nodded once before following after Naruto, Minato close on his heels.

There was no sign of the damaged young man that had arranged for the resurrection of Konoha's Hokage. This Uchiha had not lost his loved ones, nor spent his life chasing a brother that had willingly played the role of executioner. The Sasuke of the future was tainted and perhaps beyond the ability of anyone to reach except Naruto. But...Minato hoped he never had to see that destiny again.

"-said you were gonna make sushi!" Naruto pointed to the pond, looking desperate for the Uchiha matriarch to believe him. "So, I thought I better catch one of the fish for dinner...Sasuke told me after we fell in that we don't eat them."

A bark of laughter cut off further apologies and a pale hand covered her mouth in a desperate aim to suppress a line of giggles.

Mikoto's sons looked unsure of precisely how to react, but Naruto just grinned sheepishly at the dark haired beauty whose eyes were sparkling with amusement.

"Naruto-kun, I haven't laughed in a long time. Thank you." The Uchiha matriarch smiled before she placed her hands on her hips. "So, you must be Minato-kun. My name is Uchiha Mikoto. Shisui just finished telling me that you'll be staying with us."

Manoeuvring himself past his friends, Minato bowed politely. "My name is Senju Minato. I apologize for the intrusion but--"

"You're not staying with me?!" His son's appalling lack of manners--not that Minato placed a lick of blame on Naruto--made a thunderous reappearance that looked one part heartbroken and the other part resigned.

"Not to worry." Mikoto appeared to sense the brewing storm and was quick to smooth things over. "I already intended on having you stay the night with us Naruto-kun."

"You...you want me to stay?" The disbelief staining the blonde's words was palpable and Minato had to restrain himself when the blonde became rather misty eyed. The possibility had never occurred to Naruto and Minato found himself unspeakably thankful to Kushina's best friend.

Sasuke appeared to be taking the news well. The other boy looked confused, but not really displeased. Minato settled for counting that as a win.

"We do." The mother said firmly before shooting Minato a look both calculating and cautious; the former Kage understood that Mikoto saw his presence as more political in nature than anything, but the woman's perspective was likely effected by his interactions with Sasuke and Naruto. "You are both welcome here, Naruto and Minato. Although, I think the three of you need a thorough cleaning. You smell like fish."

"Yes." Itachi deadpanned from where he had reappeared at Sasuke's elbow holding a stack of neatly, folded towels. Without missing a beat, the older brother agilely avoided a punch from Sasuke and poked his brother on the forehead. "Sorry, Sasuke. I can't play with you right now...you smell offensive."

"We should prank him too." Naruto muttered darkly.

"Hn."

"Thank you, Mikoto-sama!" Minato bowed again, knowing well the Uchiha Clan's appreciation for customs.

"No need for such formalities, Minato-kun." The matriarch replied kindly, rapidly folding each of them into a towel and ordering them to strip. "I'm going to have the two of you borrow some clothes from Sasuke for tonight. We'll see about tomorrow. But first...let's get you boys cleaned up."

Now that did not sound ominous at all...right?

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Dinner *was* sushi, but fresh from the market and definitely not from the pond out back. Shisui had pretended not to notice the three youngsters shooting him nasty glares and had a primarily one-sided conversation regarding Shisui's shunshin ability that supposedly had earned him the moniker of teleporter. No knowledge was useless, so Minato had stored that tidbit of information away for later consideration.

Mikoto had brushed all of their hair, Sasuke's returning to a natural, almost avian shape that Minato definitely did not comment on. Naruto's honestly did not look at that different except that the mother had obviously taken scissors to the sides so the blonde's spikes looked less unkempt. Minato had frozen like someone petrified but had quickly relaxed until he was like a happy pile of goo; the Senju was shocked by how *awesome* it felt to have someone comb your hair. No wonder Kushina had always asked him to brush her hair for her. It was amazing!

Not even Shisui had escaped hair duty. Mikoto had bullied him until he sat down and now the Uchiha was sporting a buzz cut and was mourning his hair with a few actual tears. Minato actually smirked when Mikoto brushed off his whining and told him to train harder. Vengeance should not be the answer, but the Senju felt a little
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entitled at this point.

How many of these shirts did Sasuke have? Minato, Naruto, and Sasuke were all wearing identical sets of black silk pajamas. Naruto had fidgeted with the buttons, but had quickly stopped after seeing how irritated Mikoto was. It rapidly was becoming obvious that Naruto would rather set himself on fire than displease the clan matriarch.

Minato did not quite pin down precisely what was bothering Naruto until the bouncing human sunshine willingly crawled into Mikoto's lap after dinner to look at a children's story and he watched the woman ruffle the blonde's hair and painstakingly sound out the characters in a book.

It hit Minato then that Naruto was craving the contact that only a mother could provide, that Kushina was unable to provide.

Obito, how could you allow Madara to twist you into such a shadow of the boy you were? I don't know if I'll ever understand and perhaps it's selfish, but I don't want to.

Minato was more than a little drowsy after playing with his new friends, the inquisition at the hospital, and cleaning Naruto's apartment--which had probably been a big waste of time if his gut instinct regarding Mikoto's behavior was a sign of anything.

Shuffling to the couch, he felt a moment of longing as he looked at the image of a parent and child that was painful to look at simply because it reopened old wounds. Minato could never begrudge his son the joy of a mother especially if Mikoto was willing to assume the role, but moments like these reminded him of how much he had been lost.

Namikaze Minato had used all his anger up a long time ago, but his son deserved to be sitting with Kushina in front of their fire place. Naruto should have been able to sit at the table and make his first stab at fuinjutsu with *him*.

Except Senju Minato was wasting his regrets on possibilities that were never going to come to be no matter how deeply he wished otherwise. Turning away from the tender moment between the two, Minato hopped up next to Sasuke.

The other boy grunted in acknowledgement and tipped his book slightly so that Minato could see. Mumbling a thanks, he rubbed

his eyes with the back of his hand tiredly and settled into to read over Sasuke's shoulder.

Before he knew it, Minato felt his perception fade to an artificial darkness and in the next instant he was sitting next to a restless Kurama whose chakra was noticeably more full like a wilted plant that had perked up with a bit of sunlight.

'Kurama?'

'**We're in enemy territory.**' *Kyuubi rumbled in displeasure. Minato ignored Kurama's rage and moved forward until he was sitting down, head resting against Kurama's fur.*

'I know you don't like the Uchiha Clan, but we have bigger concerns.'

'**I don't like this.**' *The rattled bijuu hunkered down until he was resting on the cool floor of their mindscape, tails swishing behind him like a nervous feline.* '**But you may be right. Outside of your mindscape, for every moment that passes, perhaps five minutes pass here.**'

'That's perfect. We need to discuss what little we know about the future if we want to change the future.'

'**That's rather limited, isn't it? Why don't you just focus on becoming stronger than you were before and motivating your gaki and a few of the rest into training hard for what you know is coming.**'

'Not so easy. Okay, so I know that Orochimaru killed Sandaime-sama during the Chunin Exams in Konoha that Naruto participated in. So...that was eight or nine years from now?'

'**That may not ever happen,**' *Kurama effortlessly burst his bubble.* '**With you pinning Orochimaru for his future crimes, Konoha may decide to move against him sooner.**'

'I had considered that.' Minato remarked, shifting closer as he cuddled into the fox's fur. It had been a problem in his old body and it was just as troubling in his new body, but he loathed the cold and Kurama radiated warmth. Obligingly, the bijuu flicked one of his tails over top him and the Senju snuggled into the fur. 'But, I thought I should at least put it out there.'

'**That brilliant Itachi gaki wiped out the Uchiha.**' *The bijuu*

definitely sounded proud of that little genocide.

'Yep, adding that to the list of things we absolutely need to change.' Kurama huffed angrily and Minato tried to appeal to the fox's logical side. 'You know that a few talented Sharingan users would be a significant help against Obito's forces.'

'Fine. But don't expect me to be happy about it.'

'Oh believe me, I don't.' Minato closed his eyes only to sputter when the tail flicked again, batting him in the face. Dragging down the twitching limb, Minato sighed. With Kurama, retaliation was simply not an option. 'Anyway, we saw some of the skillsets from both Sasuke and Naruto in the future, so I should be able to assist in their development with some of the things I observed. But Sasuke mentioned that Danzo confirmed Itachi's role in the massacre. Therefore, we can safely assume that Danzo played a role of some sort in planning it. Though with Shimura Danzo, I'm inclined to believe there is more that we don't know than even Sasuke would have suspected.'

'I know nothing of this Danzo character, but if he is as dangerous as your emotions suggest...I will be able to locate him quite easily should it become necessary. And with your evolved, Senju sensory capability, you'll be closer to the level you were at when using my chakra.'

'As we are now, we are no match for a genin.' Minato murmured, bowing his head in thought. The mirrored surface of the water reflected back at him. 'But it's nice to have options.'

"We know Obito is using that Zetsu creature infused with the Shodai Hokage's vile chakra." *Kurama remarked, obviously unsettled.* **'And that someone other than Orochimaru used Edo-Tensei to resurrect Madara.'**

'I think the individual responsible must have been from Konoha itself or an associate of Orochimaru's afterward. We don't have enough information and that person is hardly the real issue here. The real issue is preventing the Edo Tensei altogether or creating a counter-measure. The fact that Madara dismissed the counter is also worrying."

'I would rather not bring this idea up because it goes against the very laws of nature, but could you Edo-Tensei someone?'

'In theory...maybe, but would I actually want to do that? It did not

seem to help us that much anyway.'

'To save the world?' Recalling souls of the deceased was an unpleasant reality that Minato would rather not deal with, but as a last resort?

'I'll think about it, but I would rather avoid doing so unless there is no other way.'

'Aside from your battlefield observations of various shinobi and the fact that the nations actually managed to set aside their differences, however temporarily, I think we know very little.'

'A lot is changing though,' Minato protested. 'I have a feeling that Tsunade was not present in the village at this point. And Naruto will certainly have a lot more help this time around. You and I will make sure of that. But, if there is a chance that you can speak to your other half?"

'For all that a few years have passed, your seal that you put on Naruto is still quite raw. You created the seal to allow a steady flow of chakra to mix with Naruto's over a period of time, but the sealing itself weakened my other half stronger than normal simply because you ripped off my yin chakra.'

'I'm sorry about that, Kurama.' Minato apologized, not for the first time, and far from the last time. 'I just did what I thought I had to.'

'You did what you felt was right.' *The fox hardly sounded happy about that, but neither did it incite him to rage as it once did. And after all this time, they were certainly friends.* **'We have been over this more times than I can recall, Minato. Save your apologies for someone that cares to entertain them, that certainly isn't me.'**

'Kurama, I know you just said you could not contact your counterpart yet,' Minato began carefully, aware of the slit pupil following his motions. 'But can you make contact with the other bijuu?'

'I was afraid you would ask that.' *Kurama muttered, flexing his claws.* **'I never should have told you about our communication ability.'**

'It would certainly be a great benefit if your siblings were not captured, Kurama-sama.' Minato wove only the barest bit of diplomacy into his tone. The bijuu was not easily impressed by formalities, but he was inclined to give it a shot anyway. 'I know that you really care for all of

them deep down even if it's been a long time since you were all together. You once told me about the Sage's house.'

'**I barely remember that.**' *It was a weak protest. Kurama knew it. Minato knew it. And Kurama knew Minato knew. Nevertheless, neither of them said a word for a few minutes.*

"You told me once that there was only one human you had ever respected, ever loved." Minato coaxed gently, scratching one of Kurama's oversized ears in one of his favorite spots--though the task was much more difficult now that Minato was so much smaller. 'Don't you think he would have wanted you to save your siblings?'

'**Very well.**' *That was unexpected. Minato had been expecting more of a fight.* '**Gyuki and Matatabi will be safe enough on their own for now. That Killer B individual was fighting with Naruto at the end. I will not contact them anytime soon.**'

'What about the others?'

'**Isobu I dare not contact. I can sense the foulness of the Uchiha's genjutsu clouding the turtle even from a distance.**' *Obito had gotten one so early? How on Earth had that happened?* '**Kokuo and Son Goku have containers from Iwagakure. For your safety, Minato, I refuse to contact them until later.**'

Minato was not sure he agreed, but he could tell that Kurama was serious so simply agreed and backed off the issue. For now.

'**Saiken and Choumei were some of my more pleasant siblings,**" *Kurama admitted, a foxy grin flashing a maw full of fangs.* '**I could speak to them without fear of being compromised.**'

That was a better response than he could have hoped for. Despite the numerous negatives, there were at least two bijuu his old friend had agreed to communicate with, but was there not one missing?

'What about the Ichibi?' What was his name again? 'Shukaku?'

'**That tanuki is more trouble than he's worth. Forget it.**'

'Kurama!' He scolded his old friend, honestly disappointed in the abrupt refusal. 'No one is perfect. He's your brother and he'll need your help.'

'**No.**'

'Why not?'

'That sandy bastard is already mostly insane. If I offered to tell him anything at all, he would accuse me of trying to one-up him. I hardly need to *try* to do that.'

Feeling like he was the millennia old being instead of his stubborn companion, Minato sighed and prodded his furry friend carefully. 'Perhaps you should approach him in a different way. You've said before that Shukaku has small-dog syndrome...perhaps use that. Challenge him instead.'

'Challenge him?' *Hook line and sinker. Minato mentally cheered.*

'If he isn't rational, appealing to reason won't work.' Minato tucked in the reminder. 'But if you anticipate his reaction, it should be simple for his big brother to play on his insanity and manipulate him into doing what you want him to do.'

'I'll consider that.' *Probably the best he was going to get out of the situation.* **'I'll try to contact Saiken first. I find him the least disagreeable of all of them except perhaps Isobu. My concentration will be elsewhere so don't expect to hear from me for a while. Good luck, gaki.'**

'Thank you, Kurama.' Daringly he wraps his arms around a massive paw and buries his face in the fur. Then he disengages himself from his furry comrade and ends the shared mindscape.

He has been gone barely a few seconds and he is thankful for that. Minato is able to focus on the pictures and writing with little trouble and followed along, finding himself surprisingly engaged with the simplistic, but engaging story about a wolf cub that travels across the elemental nations searching for his father.

"Alright everyone! Bedtime!" Mikoto lifted a shocked Naruto up with her when she stands, but Minato is prepared and merely smiles encouragingly at the confused looking blonde.

"I'm going to put Naruto in his own room for tonight," Mikoto announced, turning while still carrying Naruto who had wound his arms around the tolerant mother's neck like a monkey. "Minato, I'm afraid you'll have to bunk with one of the boys. You can sleep with whoever you're most comfortable with, though I should warn you that

Sasuke-chan is like an octopus."

"Am not." The four year old griped petulantly.

"If Naruto doesn't mind sharing again, I'm happy to stay with him." The Senju muffled a yawn sleepily.

Mikoto hums in agreement before ushering them all toward the bedrooms. It actually caught Minato off-guard when he is pressed into a soft pillow, not recalling the journey to the room nor being lifted up. Blinking, it is Itachi's face above his looking startling young with a furtive smile on his face.

A finger poked his forehead and the Senju blinked muzzily at the Uchiha heir.

"Goodnight, Minato-kun."

A more vocal protest is voiced next to him and Minato relaxed a fraction when he hears Naruto muttering a protest.

"Goodnight, Naruto-kun."

"Night, Itachi-san." Minato murmured, eyes drooping.

"Tomorrow is going to be a big day, you boys better get some sleep." Mikoto, Minato places the voice. He is too far gone to catch the rest, but Naruto's chakra has warmed like a spring bursting with joy.

It was a pleasant emotion to fall asleep to.

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Uchiha Mikoto braced herself as she studied her reflection in the mirror. It had been years since she had donned her kunoichi battle dress. Her leggings were wrapped, kunai were hidden in holsters under both legs, and her old flak jacket was on. Instead of long flowing hair, a serviceable bun reinforced the point she was going to drive home.

For a moment she hesitated on the sheath of the katana that Kushina had bought for her with the promise to teach her. The Habenero had made good on her threat; Kushina had drilled Mikoto for hours in the Uzumaki style of kenjutsu claiming it was important for Mikoto to have a fall back if her genjutsu failed since her taijutsu was 'bad enough to make a Nara look good.' Mikoto would never be
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called a kenjutsu expert, but her body remembered the Uzumaki style and she was the only person in Konoha that could pass on the art to the last living descendent. Quietly adding it to the ever growing list of things she would need to teach Naruto, Mikoto attached the blade without another thought.

Finally she looked at her old hitai-ate and ran a finger over the surface and remembered the oath of service. Even if it was just for tonight, Uchiha Mikoto was a proud kunoichi of Konohagakure no Sato.

Decisively, she tied it on, gave herself a final critical once over and strode toward the front area. Itachi was at the stove, hand poised over a mug of tea, but he faltered once when he saw her.

Without waiting for him to speak, Mikoto crossed the distance between them and pressed a kiss to her son's forehead.

"You intend to adopt Naruto-kun." There was no one as perceptive as her son. Mikoto warmed with pride. "Father will be displeased."

"Some things that are worth fighting for are more important than the approval of another person." Mikoto responded honestly, knowing her son would see right through a deception. "Seeing Naruto has reminded me of the person I used to be. Your father will understand. Will you and Shisui be alright with the boys?"

"Yes."

"I'll be home soon."

A shunshin carried her outside the compound and onto a rooftop. The sun was disappearing behind the clouds. Fugaku would no doubt be meeting with the Hokage by now. Time was of the essence. A few rapid bursts of speed had Mikoto wondering how she had ever chosen to give this up. The wind in your face, the chakra pumping pleasantly through her feet--this was life.

At the Hokage Tower base, Mikoto strode briskly inside, a few Chunin quelling under her cool stare. Her ascent to the office was efficient and quick and she left behind trails of whisper and gossip that would no doubt have flooded the village by sunrise. Instead of annoyed, she felt strangely excited by the fact. She had spent enough years being quiet and she could definitely say it was overrated.

As she walked down the final hallway toward the Hokage's office, she felt her resolve harden and her anger that she had been holding in snapped like worn thread. With a spurt of chakra she raced toward the office, ignored the protests of the Sandaime's incompetent secretary, and threw open the door.

Taking in the Hokage behind his desk and her husband opposite him, Mikoto dashed forward leaking killing intent and slammed a kunai into the wood. A few ANBU appeared like shadows waiting for an order from the Hokage. Fugaku, still in uniform, had taken an unconscious step backward and looked like he had never really seen her before.

Good, she smirked inwardly as her husband balked. Fugaku knew there was a new alpha in town.

"Hokage-sama," Mikoto flashed Hiruzen her most devastating smile. There was a reason she had a reputation for 'killing sweetly.' "I've just put three little boys to bed so I'm afraid I can't stay very long. But I came here to inform you that Uzumaki Naruto will be living with us from now on. So please, kindly sign over guardianship before I lose my temper!"

Chapter End Notes

To everyone who has given this story a chance, thank you for doing so. To all my reviewers, you genuinely make my days better. Thank you!

Chapter 5: Pranks and Learning something new

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hiruzen admired the kunai neatly buried in his desk and subtly drank in the impressive amount of killing intent saturating the air. Only a kunoichi with guts would dare behave so aggressively in his presence. It was refreshing. Biwako had attracted his attention, once-upon-a-time, by striking him across the face. He married her six weeks later after pursuing *her*. Watching how Mikoto's face had reddened so prettily, so defiantly made Hiruzen long for days when he was much younger and far more dismissive of danger. It was almost a shame that age was accompanied by the wisdom to know better.

With a wave of his hand, the Sandaime dismissed the edgy ANBU lurking and preparing to intervene.

"Do not disturb us." Like wraiths, the masked shinobi all but faded into the backdrop and left him alone with the two Uchiha clan leaders. While he performed the handseals to activate the privacy seals in his office, Fugaku unwisely dared to stir from his stupor, edging toward his wife with a forbidding look in his eyes.

"Just what do you think you're doing? Have you lost your senses, woman!" The man's eyes flashed into scarlet pinwheels only for him to backpedal when Mikoto spun with the grace of a dancer, her arm lashing out, and her palm connecting with a resounding slap to Fugaku's cheek.

It was difficult to say who was more shocked, but Mikoto buried it instantly and lifted her chin looking every inch a lethal tigress.

"Don't you *ever* speak to me that way." Hiruzen smiled triumphantly, sensing there was more than one battle to be won on this occasion. "I am your wife. I am not your servant. You will *not* treat me like dirt to grind beneath your sandals. And you will not tell me what to do!"

"Mikoto-san." The Hokage brushed off the stubborn kunoichi's killing intent like one would a bothersome insect. "It's been

a long time since I've been graced with the presence of Konoha's original Genjutsu-hime. I'm inclined to forgive your overly zealous behavior for no other reason except that I'm pleased to see you. But tell me, why should I turn over custody of Uzumaki Naruto?"

"You're denying me, old man?" Mikoto stared at him incredulously with a look just teetering on insubordination.

"By no means." The Hokage smiled genially and rested his chin on his palm in a relaxed manner that seemed to raise the hackles on the kunoichi's back. "But while I did, at one time, anticipate having this conversation...I find this discussion has arrived four years late. So please, enlighten me, Mikoto-san. Why should I give you custody of Naruto-kun, now? What has changed in the grand scheme of things? I'll be honest, my inclination to grant your request is weighed not by your threats, but by what you offer."

Some of Mikoto's bravado slipped, but there was iron in the woman's eyes. Good, perhaps there was a fire still burning inside her that could spare more than just one life tonight. There was never an end to political machinations--not for a Kage--but Hiruzen hoped he did not find her answers wanting.

"I would be interested in hearing the reasoning behind this as well." Hiruzen zeroed in on Fugaku's voice dripping disdain and it took everything the Hokage had not to flatten the pompous Uchiha where he stood. Dithering fools were all too commonplace in a Kage's position, but his tolerance for foolishness was reaching even his limits for the day.

"Fugaku." His voice dropped an octave and the Clan Head's attention flickered his way, releasing only the smallest tremor of fear before burying the emotion behind the mask the Uchiha Clan so prided themselves on. "If the source of your disdain is what I believe it to be, I will be greatly displeased."

"I could care less about the boy being a jinchuuriki," the Uchiha managed to surprise him and the Sandaime smothered his killing intent, absently running a finger nail along his wrinkled jaw. "That gaki may only be four years old, but he lacks manners and is a ruffian in the making. I don't want him influencing Sasuke at such a critical stage."

"Do you suppose the death of his *parents* and the spite of an entire shinobi village might have something to do with that?" Mikoto's

anger was back, having found a target to vent her frustrations upon. "Do you suppose being thrown out of the orphanage onto the streets might have something to do with that?"

The Uchiha patriarch had paled considerably, but was far from cowed. "True or not, I don't want him around our children!" Fugaku crossed his arms in a futile attempt to look stern.

"Are you afraid?" Mikoto mocked her husband boldly, seeming to take considerable pleasure out of the outraged shock on her husband's face. "Are you such an incapable parent that you don't think you could handle, Naruto? Or are you such a coward that you would abandon Namikaze's son!"

"I am no coward!" The famous Uchiha temper was out in force and it appeared that Fugaku had forgotten he had a captive audience to this not-so-little spat. "You will not speak to me this way!"

Little chunks of spit flew out of Fugaku's mouth, but his wife was entirely unphased. To Hiruzen's delight, Uchiha Mikoto reared back and struck her husband squarely in the nose with a solid crunch.

"I'm not your doormat." Mikoto panted harshly, muscling the shocked, bleeding man into one of the Hokage's empty chairs where he gazed at her with stunned eyes. "I am your wife and you will treat me with the respect that I deserve. I want to bring the son *our* best friends into our home and put a roof over his head. I want to feed him until his ribs stop sticking out so much. And I want to see Sasuke smiling with Naruto and the Senju boy. I want to make sure the son of my best friend gets a chance to live the dreams that his parents died defending."

"Mikoto." The reply was stuffy and whispered from behind his cupped hands, but the man's shoulders were slumped and the Hokage felt like a hyena just waiting for his prey to succumb to the inevitable.

Hiruzen, not blind to the suffering of his subordinates, handed the man a tissue that Fugaku actually made a sign of gratitude for while wiping grimly at the blood running over his face and fingers. Mikoto dropped to her knees in an act of repentance, her fingers faintly glowing green from an out-of-practice healing jutsu. Fugaku was stiff as a board, looking distinctly unhappy.

"Naruto-kun can't read." Sarutobi's pipe that he had begun

filling with tobacco fell nerveless from his fingers. How could he have missed such an important thing? To have spent barely half a day with the boy...this woman had already picked up on something that the Sandaime should have noticed. "Can you imagine my dismay, husband? The son of the studious Namikaze Minato, unable to even recognize basic characters? I've never felt the weight of my failures so keenly in all my life." There was something frayed and pleading in the woman's eyes as she stared up into the eyes of the man that she so obviously loved despite her earlier actions. "If you tell me now that you are so heartless and so lacking in love that we cannot look after this child, I will not press this issue further. But you will have lost my fondness, for I did not marry a callous stranger. I will never forgive you."

Fugaku sucked in a breath, looking absolutely wrecked and pained. "It seems the choice is made."

Mikoto ceased her efforts to heal the damaged tissue and settled for wrapping her arms around her husband in a moment of vulnerability and burying her face in his neck. The Uchiha patriarch, still decorated in blood smears, looked so utterly lost for a moment; perhaps it was to be expected since Uchiha love madly and deeply, but are incredibly private about their affections. Eventually though, Hiruzen was pleased to see Fugaku's stiff arms fold around his wife with an air of resignation clinging to him.

"I'm afraid things are not settled quite *yet*." Hiruzen loathed the idea of squashing an opportunity for Naruto, particularly when it was so clear that he would have an incredible mother, but the village's security had to be a priority in this situation. All he could do was hope he could get the Uchiha couple on board with his thinking. "I have yet to grant you permission."

Politics were something the Uchiha Clan understood better than most and the pair rose from their seats and faced him together. Fugaku blooded and poised for battle with Mikoto fingering a senbon between her fingers as if she were itching to pepper himself and his desk in the tiny monstrosities. Together, the couple were frighteningly formidable and the Sandaime yearned to attach them to the regular duty rosters--surely they would accomplish amazing feats together.

"What do you want?" Fugaku boldly stepped toward his desk.

"Before your wife barged in, I believe we discussed placing

Senju Minato under the care of the Uchiha Police Force." Sandaime began methodically packing the spilled tobacco back into his pipe, sparing a second to wave them both into seats which they both did after a moment of hesitation. "I could have placed Minato in any clan until Tsunade returns, my own included, and they all would have taken the boy and protected him to the best of their ability. Do you know why I chose the Uchiha above the rest?"

"What does this have to do with adopting Naruto?" Mikoto asked with a frown.

"Humor me." Hiruzen remarked with a sharp look directed toward the suddenly frozen Uchiha patriarch. "Why would I choose the Uchiha above any other clan in the village?"

It was an interesting question designed with the sole intention of trapping Fugaku in a corner. Observing the patriarch with a keen eye, he could visibly see perspiration coating the man's forehead and a subtle, but all too noticeable increase in respiration. That and the sudden chakra spike that had drew his wife's attention and left Fugaku swallowing like an animal caught in a trap.

"You know." A statement rather than question, but Hiruzen dignified his response with a light nod. Fugaku's lips pursed. "Then why?"

Sarutobi was pleased to see the furrow in Mikoto's brows and the way her lip trembled slightly as she shifted toward her husband with a perceivably alarmed look. All indicated that she was in the dark and that would prove incredibly useful.

"Because whatever the Uchiha Clan might feel, I want to show them that they are wrong. The Uchiha Clan has not only an incredible dojutsu, but talent and finesse that easily ranks them among the finest shinobi of Konoha." Hiruzen wove a bit of flattery, but anchored it to stone-cold facts and hoped to impress upon the leaders of the Clan exactly how serious he was about reintegrating them into the village. "I have had little opportunity to do something about the doubts beginning to take root amongst your kin, but I'm not about to pass up the opportunity to create a new foundation that the Uchiha Clan can come to appreciate."

While shaken, Mikoto appeared to connect the dots and stared in open horror at her husband.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing!" Fugaku's fist slammed into the desk, scattering the wood fragments from the earlier kunai strike as he glared back challengingly at his wife and his Kage. "We have done all that has been asked of us and we have been loyal!"

"But there is trouble brewing amongst the Uchiha, is there not?" Hiruzen challenged the protest cleanly. "And instead of coming to me, have you stirred the pot, Fugaku?"

"I am no traitor!" Fugaku protested, his eyes screaming. The *not yet* was left unspoken but implied all the same.

"I'm sorry, Hokage-sama." Mikoto murmured quietly, her attention narrowed on her husband. "I swear to you that I will discover the root of this disquiet and I will do what I can to repair the damage."

"We will." Hiruzen raised his voice, drawing even Fugaku back to wary attention. "I meant what I said before. I want the Uchiha Clan to understand how important their role was within the village. If the three of us work together, I'm confident that we can work out any loose ends."

"And Naruto?" Mikoto spoke again, looking up with bitterness in her voice and far too much shine to her eyes. "I may not have been aware of it before, but I understand perfectly the precarious position I've put you in. Even so, he doesn't deserve such a cruel fate. Give him to me. Please!"

For the first time that night, Hiruzen imagined that Fugaku actually looked like he understood where his wife was coming from. The man reached out and almost tenderly took his wife's hand in his own;

"If you want to adopt Naruto, I will allow it. As if foretelling the future, the Uchiha pair watched him but otherwise did not react. "But I have a few conditions."

"What is your price?" It was Fugaku's voice laced with resentment this time and Hiruzen knew he would have to address that or risk losing everything he was gambling upon tonight.

"First, Naruto must consent to the arrangement. I'm sure we can agree that adopting an unwilling child is out of the question."

The pair nodded slowly like they were searching his words

for hidden traps.

"What else?" Mikoto demanded.

"You know as well as I do that giving you the village's jinchuuriki is already a massive show of trust, but that alone will not assuage years of doubt. In order to rebuild our relationships, I would like members of the Uchiha Police Force to return to service in the village on a rotational basis. I perceive that unlike many Clans that have ties with each other, the Uchiha have stood alone." Raising his hand to stifle comment, Hiruzen pressed forward. "I think you may find that engaging with another clan on a regular basis will benefit our community as a whole, but also create relationships with other individuals. I would like you to invite two other Clans to take part in the police division. You may choose whichever you like to extend the offer to, but this way when some Uchiha are earning themselves new reputations by performing missions outside the village, the police force still has an active role. And while leadership can remain with the Uchiha Clan, a little integration may be just the thing we need."

"I think it will appeal to many of our young people to take missions outside the village." Mikoto attempted carefully, shooting her husband questing looks.

"The idea is not without merit. Such a task is a difficult one." The Uchiha patriarch sighed and winced, hand reflexively moving to cup his sore nose. "It's not an unreasonable suggestion."

"While I cannot ask you to become friends with the Hyuuga Clan, if Naruto, Minato, *and* Sasuke want to continue to associate with Hyuuga Hinata, I ask that you permit this to continue."

The Sandaime watched Fugaku's expression morph to an immediate refusal only for Mikoto to brazenly reply.

"You really are more manipulative than I remember you being when I was a genin," Mikoto murmured, rubbing her hitai-ate tiredly. "But after seeing the difference in my son today, *we* won't protest. Though I can't say that the Clan will be happy about it."

"Perhaps they will alter their opinions once they see the benefits of such interaction."

"Perhaps." Fugaku sniped, and the Hokage reached into his desk and rifled through a stack of documents.

"I am prepared to offer you something in return, but I will not make it official for a few years." Without looking up, he felt the intense curiosity flare in the pair and sorely wished he had a camera handy to document this historic moment. Pulling out a file, Hiruzen nonchalantly deactivated the blood seal, feeling strangely thrilled that he was the focus of such intense interest. Hiruzen glanced over the file that he had painstakingly been working on over the last year fondly; he had truly begun to believe that this document would never see the light of day. It was nice to be proven wrong sometimes. With no hint of reservation, he passed the file over to the Uchiha patriarch, smiling fondly when Mikoto sidled closer to peer over Fugaku's shoulder. "You will speak of this to no one, least of all your son. If word gets out, I will deny it and therefore close the door on this forever."

Fugaku eyes the folder like one might an exploding tag, but gingerly flips it open just the same before freezing in place.

"This..this is."

"I had been considering this since your son made genin." Hiruzen revealed, pleased to see the Fugaku's face drain of color for the second time that evening--unless you included the broken nose. "However, if we can agree that there has been a misunderstanding between the village and your Clan, I would be willing to move forward and make this official after Sasuke, Naruto, and Minato join the Academy. I believe that will give Itachi time to gain mileage and be prepared for my offer."

"Hokage-sama." Fugaku looked truly at a loss and Hiruzen felt triumph as the man bowed in a show of respect. "I don't know what to say. If this offer is genuine, than I am appreciative of this great honor. And I would like to respectfully request a private meeting at another time to discuss matters pertaining to stabilizing our ties to the village."

Dropping this on the man had been a calculated risk on Hiruzen's part. If Mikoto had not arrived and he had not seen the fire in the kunoichi's eyes, it was likely the folder would have remained buried and forgotten. But...as any leader must, the Sandaime had followed one of his sensei's finest pieces of advice. *'Strike or the opportunity is lost.'* It was true that Tobirama had been referring to a battlefield, but the statement applied to this situation just the same.

"Sowing dissension among the ranks is something I will not tolerate from anyone." Hiruzen snagged his pipe and lit it. "I've been

lenient for a long time, but if our village wants to be strong, it must do so through unity. I look forward to meeting with you Fugaku and I look forward to strengthening our ties."

The Uchiha patriarch surrendered the folder with obvious reluctance before bowing once again and turning to leave.

"Hokage-sama." Mikoto fingered the sword on her back, looking from her husband that had paused by the door and back to him. "If you were aware of the failing relations between the clan and the village, why are you trusting us with Naruto and the Senju boy?"

"Because I remember two friends that had a dream." Hiruzen looked over the two Uchiha individuals and was struck by how young they both were and saw how much they both still had to learn. At least they had the opportunity to correct their mistakes. "Though Madara chose greed over his clan and this village, Hashirama never stopped believing in the ideal of trust and fairness. Many other nations would claim these are weaknesses, but I've always believed that they are some of our greatest strengths. So in answer to your question, Uchiha Mikoto, I'm entrusting those children to you because I do believe in the Uchiha Clan. And I believe that our bonds can be restored."

"Our Clan sided with the village over Madara for a reason." Fugaku rasped. There was more than a hint of shame in the man who thrived on pride. Hiruzen smiled, knowing that he had won this round. "You are proving that your words are not empty, Sandaime-sama. I will meet with you later this week, though I suspect tomorrow's clan meeting will play a pivotal role in the outcome of all of this."

It was a thinly veiled warning that the old man had heard many times over the course of his career. But it was understandable, a public declaration of intent and follow-through would be significant in turning around the attitudes of the Uchiha Clan.

"Mikoto-san," Hiruzen called out, feeling the need to reward and manipulate one more time before the inevitable meeting to come. The woman paused again, raising a brow in question. "If you wish to return to active duty as an academy instructor or jounin-sensei, I would hire you in an instant. There is no one more suited to teaching the next generation."

"I'll consider it." Mikoto bobbed again and the pair

disappeared linking arms. Perhaps more than just the village had repaired their relationship this night.

Hiruzen stared up into the unearthly glow of the moon, feeling uncharacteristically pleased. All in all, it had been a surprisingly fortuitous day.

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Minato was roused from bed by Mikoto bright and early. Before he had time to ask questions, the strict matriarch had ushered him into the bathroom where he groggily brushed his teeth in front of the mirror. Staring at the pale stranger in the mirror, he carefully raised himself up on his tip-toes to reach the brush and mechanically pull it through his gleaming silver strands. That said and done, he paused at the medicine cabinet before quickly sliding it open, scanning the contents, and pocketing something for later.

Probing his bond with Kurama, Minato suppressed his disappointment to find the bijuu occupied. He could sense the fox's chakra without effort, but it felt like Kurama's spirit was absent. It was a strange, if unsettling side-effect of this communication attempt. Not that the Senju was insecure, but not being able to communicate effortlessly with his best friend was...strange.

Setting aside the matter of Kurama, Minato felt a familiar chakra presence flicker and move toward him until it was waiting just outside the bathroom door. Bare feet drumming across the floor as he ran, Minato slid to a stop and flung open the bathroom door.

"Good morning, Itachi-san." Minato greeted tiredly.

The older boy extended a fresh set of clothing which his arms automatically moved to accept.

"Good morning." The other boy greeted him calmly. "Kaa-san is preparing breakfast, which should be done shortly."

"Where are Naruto and Sasuke?" He asked, feeling like the omission may have been deliberate.

"Gaaaah!" There was a loud bang followed by a crash that had Minato sidestepping into Itachi. Without missing a beat, the Senju felt steadying hands brace him before he could topple over and dump his clothing.
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"I believe they were up early plotting on your behalf." Itachi offered quietly and Minato's eyes bugged. "But you should dress first. I have no doubt you'll be regaled with stories of what you missed."

Definitely *not* pouting, Minato uttered a quiet thank you before reluctantly retreating to his bedroom and slipping into the traditional clan clothing of Uchiha males. If it was the last thing he did, the Senju was going to find a shirt without such an irritating collar!

Feeling oddly eager, Minato charged out of the room and skidded to a halt in the living area where his friends were having a good snicker. Shisui was kneeling on the ground swearing harshly while trying desperately to keep his glittery pink hair from dripping all over the furniture.

"Wow you guys really pulled one over on him!" Minato praised the pair, seeing Naruto swell like a balloon and Sasuke smirk viciously over his cousin.

"We totally got him!" Naruto boasted cheerfully, while Sasuke silently mouthed. 'One more to come.'

Minato's brows shot up in intrigue and he could not help the sly smirk he shot Shisui.

"Pink suits you so well, Shisui-nii!"

"I'm going to beat the crap out of both of you! All of you!" Shisui swore murderously. "Son of a--"

"Uchiha Shisui!" Collectively the room froze but Shisui looked like an animal caught in a trap. From the doorway, Minato's old friend stepped into the room looking exhausted and sporting a bandage over his nose. The Uchiha patriarch scowled at everyone, but his eyes seemed to linger over Minato the longest before finally settling on Shisui and his lip curled downward in disgust. "Clean yourself up. No Uchiha will present himself this way."

For all his bluster, Naruto looked ready to use Sasuke as a human shield despite the fact that Sasuke looked ready to piss himself.

"I don't want to see paint in this house again." Fugaku glared at the shaking duo, seeming perplexed when Minato just stared back coolly. "Get into the kitchen. Breakfast is about ready."

They scrambled to obey like a pack of wolves was at their heels.

The kitchen itself smelled even more tantalizing than Kushina's cooking. Thankfully he would never have to face the redhead's wrath for thinking something so dangerous. Behind them the sound of running water marked the shower running.

"My goodness." Mikoto turned, greeting them all with a pleased smile while a platter of tasty morsels on a plate. "You all must be very hungry this morning."

"Good morning, Mikoto-sama." Minato smiled, ducking his head when the matriarch ruffled his hair with her free hand. "Can we help at all?"

"What he said!" Naruto leapt into the air cheerfully, only missing knocking the platter away due to some adept reflexes on Mikoto's end. The platter was carefully set on the table and a bemused mother gave both Naruto and Sasuke half-hugs.

"If you boys want to make sure everyone has some tea, I would appreciate that."

They quickly scurried to the counter, Sasuke pouring the tea while Naruto and Minato ferried the cups to the table. Of course, Minato may have casually stirred his medicine cabinet acquisition into the last glass before placing it on the last remaining seat smugly.

Fugaku appeared in the doorway with his hair looking a bit more orderly in a ebony toned kimono. It confirmed Minato's suspicions that a Clan meeting would be underway this morning.

To his experienced eye, Minato noted the stiffness interactions between the Clan Head and his wife. It was subtle, but it was there nevertheless and Minato suspected the man's bandaged nose had something to do with that. Mikoto cheerfully patted each of their head's in turn and place a plate of steaming food in front of them.

Itachi sat down next to his father without comment, dressed informally in Uchiha standard, genin attire. Lifting his chopsticks to his mouth, he paused when pounding feet sounded and Shisui appeared in doorway freshly dressed and only a few flecks of pink stubbornly clinging to his buzzed hair. Fugaku had paused and was observing the panting Uchiha with his shirt clinging to his moist skin. Shisui rubbed his hands together and took a seat between them.

Prepared to greet the older boy, Minato was suddenly overcome by a distinctly unpleasant smell and recoiled slightly from the chunin who had already begun loading his plate with extras.

"Shisui-kun," Minato greeted the other boy faintly, catching sight of Itachi who appeared to have shifted away from the other boy minutely. "Didn't you...just shower?"

"Yeah, why?"

Naruto was gagging over his bowl, reddening like a tomato. Ah. Minato grimaced, a look of resigned understanding crossing his face as he turned to look at a smug looking Sasuke who was smirking into his plate.

"No reason." Minato murmured faintly, scuttling toward Sasuke and taking a hearty bite of oatmeal that burst with fresh fruit.

"I bet you guys just want me to play with you." Shisui swallowed his food, leering down the table at the group of them. "After that little stunt this morning, it would only be my sincere *pleasure*."

"Why would we want you to join us, gum-head?" Naruto asked rudely, stuffing a large bite into his mouth and chewing obnoxiously; Minato groaned into his fist, taking only some solace in Fugaku and Mikoto's dismayed expressions. "You're a total teme!"

"Weak too." Sasuke added in between considerably smaller bites, though Minato noticed the frown on Fugaku's face at his son's casual declaration. "And he looks stupid with a buzz cut."

"Naruto-kun!" Mikoto, wrapped the boisterous blonde with her chopsticks causing the Uzumaki to recoil and stare at her in shock. "Chew with your mouth closed, ok? And no speaking with your mouth full, got it?"

Naruto shivered, looking prepared to spontaneously combust at the aura of danger surrounding the deceptively sweet-smiling woman.

"Got it.." he choked, staring in horror at his food for a moment.

"Why is your hair like that?" Fugaku's tone dripped disdain as he addressed the lower ranking Uchiha member with a narrow

look.

"Shisui was playing with Sasuke and his friends when they utilized an impressive teamwork strategy that resulted in a large clump of chewing gum being stuck in his hair." Itachi somehow managed to respond in a way that made it seem that Itachi found the entire matter boringly trivial. "I believe Hiashi's daughter was responsible for the success."

"You were defeated by a Hyuuga?" Fugaku looked like he was about to spout a large Katon jutsu."Disgraceful."

"What's wrong with the Hyuuga Clan?" Sasuke wondered aloud, oblivious to the displeased glower on his father's face. "Hinata-san seems fine to me."

"Nothing at all, Sasuke-chan." Chakra flickered, registering irritation and determination in spades from both of the stubborn married couple. "Your father simply has a lot of pride as an Uchiha, which is a good thing. Sometimes though, I think he forgets that there is life *outside* the clan.

Yep, classic double conversation happening with them being stuck right in the middle.

"I don't see why we had to wake up so early. I *never* get up this early." Naruto whined, giving an unmoved Mikoto the wide-eye treatment.

"Naruto," the sly Senju prodded the blonde's arm, disrupting his efforts to rub his eyes tiredly. "It's clear that Sasuke-kun isn't used to getting up early either." Sasuke grunted cutely into his bowl. Minato could hardly wait until they realized that getting up for the Academy would require early wake-up calls. "But I doubt Fugaku-sama or Mikoto-sama would wake us all up without good reason, do you?"

Minato was aware of Itachi's analytical mind examining him, but waved the matter off. Might as well reinforce the prodigy label; concealing his intelligence was not just unavoidable, it was strategically unwise. But a bright child could get away with accelerated growth and even encouraging others in a similar development. Better to plant the seeds that Minato wanted to grow rather than to end up with an unexpected crop.

"I guess not." Naruto groused, uncharacteristically moody.

Was Sasuke rubbing off on him already?

"Why are we up so early?" Sasuke looked hopefully down the table to where Itachi was sitting. "Is Nii-san going to train with me and my friends today?"

The kid got points for remembering his comrades, but Minato's heart fluttered painfully at the shattered look on the youngest Uchiha when his older brother shook his head apologetically.

"Sorry, Sasuke. I have training today."

"Train hard." There was an iron look from the patriarch as he looked at Sasuke expectantly. "Be like your brother."

Minato did not care if he was four in that moment, nor did he care that his position as a Senju would hardly credit him, but the hurt look on Sasuke's face was just...

"Everyone has different talents." Minato spoke, straightening his spine and channeling every ounce of subtle authority he could without looking like an utter imposter. "Sasuke will become stronger by working hard and honing the talents that he is suited for. Following in another person's footsteps, however well intended, will hamper his efforts to grow." Sensing that perhaps he had gone a little too far, he slung an arm around Naruto, fingers skating over Sasuke's bony shoulder for a moment in a gesture of solidarity. "Besides, we're going to be a team, ne Naruto? Sasuke-kun?"

"The will of Fire truly does resonate in you, Minato-kun." Itachi commented dryly, though Minato detected a glimmer of approval in the other boy's chakra. "I'm pleased Sasuke has found such friends. Perhaps I'll have to borrow you from my otouto."

"Not a chance," Sasuke snapped back, pointing to Shisui. "You can take that idiot."

"Language." Mikoto murmured.

While Fugaku continued to look rebellious, he mulishly ate his breakfast while Sasuke and Naruto returned to their grazing. Minato took in Shisui's empty cup of tea with a pleased eye--mission accomplished.

"Now, after everyone is finished, we're going to go see Hokage-sama this morning." Mikoto explained reasonably, expression

clouding slightly when Naruto interrupted--yet again.

"Noooo." Naruto only avoided knocking his glass flying due to Minato's quick reflexes."What could *possibly* be so important? Jiji is *always* in his office. Day or night! We didn't have to wake up early!"

"Naruto-chan." Minato recoiled wisely, reading the symptoms of Mikoto's rising displeasure in the inflection of the matriarch's voice. "There is a very important meeting between the Clan Heads set for this morning that the Hokage must attend. Therefore, it's important that we meet with Sandaime-sama before we attend."

Instead of settling, Naruto apparently was intent upon having a fulfilled death wish and plowed onward. "What could possibly be so important? And is Fugaku-san going, because he has that look on his face that I get when I really, *really* need to go to the bathroom." Shisui guffawed helplessly, while Fugaku purpled and shook a fist purposefully in the chunin's direction. Thankfully, Minato sensed amusement creep into Mikoto's eyes and Minato risked a glance at a slack-jawed Sasuke. Naruto, his impudent sort-of, offspring, just pointed the finger toward the enraged patriarch. "See what I mean! His face just shrivelled up like a prune! How can we go anywhere if--"

The Senju gambled and slammed a palm over the blonde's mouth, causing plates to rattle in warning, and muffling Naruto's squawk of protest. Sasuke looked torn between laughter and good, rational pretend-this-moment-never-occurred, trauma.

"I love this kid!" Shisui snickered, pounding a fist on the table hard enough to tip over Itachi's mug had the alert genin not rescued it.

"Naruto-chan." Mikoto was the epitome of poise. Sipping her tea lightly, the woman wrapped the table with her free hand lightly. "While your comparison may have some accuracy, it is unfortunate that you spoke aloud. You may have unintentionally hurt Fugaku's feelings. Perhaps you should apologize."

"Sorry." Naruto grumbled, obviously not really meaning it, but at least the blonde had done so.

"I don't want to hear any more complaints about seeing Hokage-sama, am I understood?" Mikoto shined an eye on the lot of them.

"Hn."

"Understood, Mikoto-sama." The Senju bowed in acceptance, aware of Fugaku's calculating stare from the corner.

Without breaking a sweat, Minato nudged Naruto who grudgingly nodded in what Minato recognized to be feigned compliance. Kushina had pulled one over on him far too often with that look. Feeling it was both his prerogative and duty to step-in before his unruly son--friend, required a legitimate rescue, Minato dropped a line.

"Perhaps, if we behave well, Mikoto-sama will take us for ramen after this is all over." The use of the honorific to placate the Uchiha Clan, and the ramen to divert a stubborn Uzumaki.

Attitude turning a 180, Naruto almost tearfully held out a pair of praying hands toward the woman.

"So that's how it is." Mikoto huffed. There was almost melancholic cast to the proud woman's features in that moment. "Only if you're good, than perhaps we will stop for some ramen."

"Yatta!" Genetic fixation quirk was a go.

"Let's go." Fugaku rose looking strangely quiet and resigned at the same time. Then the father took on a look of peculiar pleasure when he paused in front of his eldest. The genin must have sensed something was up because Minato's breath caught in his throat as the father dropped his hands on his son's shoulders. "Itachi, make me proud."

"Tou-san." For the first time, Itachi looked uncertain and his voice a bit shaken.

Fugaku dropped his hands away from his eldest's shoulders and made a beeline straight for *him.* Before he knew it, Minato was swept forward under the impatient patriarch's arm. This certainly felt out of character and Minato stiffly craned his neck to stare at the man who was determinedly looking away.

"Tou-san!" Sasuke appeared on his father's opposite side, sliding under an arm too. "I'm ready!"

"Your kaa-san has the Naruto?" Fugaku grunted.

"She has Naruto." Sasuke replied tentatively and Minato just closed his eyes against the negative behavior. Certainly Naruto could be trying, but that did not earn him such poor treatment and regard.

"And I'm coming too!" Shisui zipped forward, vanishing in an impressively rapid shunshin.

"Like anyone asked you to come." Sasuke muttered under his breath.

"Sasuke." Fugaku's tone had Minato and Sasuke straightening their spines. "You are not to turn out like your cousin."

"Understood." If there was a flash of rebellion in Sasuke's chakra, Minato certainly was not about to point that out.

A few rapid shunshin had them standing outside the Hokage's office. Minato feigned looking around which was hardly difficult since the building triggered a lot of nostalgia in the small Senju.

The door opened for them and Hiruzen beckoned them inside. Mikoto slipped her arm into the crook of her husband's elbow and they walked together presenting a unified front--even if Minato was aware that there was real trouble in paradise.

"Jiji!" The blonde made an impressive running leap only to be caught midair by a put-upon Fugaku.

"You are in front of the leader of the village." The words carried a hint of warning and the blonde ceased his struggles and tipped his head curiously while he was released much more gently than he was grabbed. "While you live under my roof, I expect you to conduct yourself like an Uchiha. Understood?"

My old friend. I can tell that you don't want to like Naruto...but I think if you give him a chance, you'll find your life much better.

"It is no burden upon me, Fugaku-san." The Hokage spoke calmly, stepping forward to urge Naruto back to his desk. "How has your morning been, Naruto?"

Minato was equally pleased and disturbed by the familiarity the two exchanged. Naruto was eagerly retelling the Sandaime about lunch yesterday, the incident with the koi pond, and ending with breakfast that morning. Still, the blonde withheld nothing and was

provided little in return. Though Minato had lived before and recognized that attention starved individuals devoured affection wherever it was offered and perceived crumbs to be cake. It was a hollow realization to know that Naruto was potentially valued more as a village asset than as a person. Had his son's growth been purposefully stunted or had it been a consequence of a hundred factors conspiring together.

Minato desperately wished Kurama was not unavailable in that moment. The Senju desperately needed someone to vent to and unfortunately his only viable option was out of the question until his round of discussions with the other bijuu were concluded.

Time travel really was bothersome.

"Minato-kun," the Sandaime smiled benevolently on him, his fingers waving him forward. Having not entirely been paying attention, Minato mentally berated himself for the little slip and nearly jerked away when his hair was patted wistfully. "Did you have a good evening last night?"

The question was innocent sounding, but Minato knew exactly what the old man was digging for.

"I have mixed feelings about Shisui-kun." Minato threw the smelly chunin under the bus without batting an eye. Hiruzen chuckled, putting on a performance that had the benefit of being honest. "But Mikoto-sama was very welcoming and I enjoyed playing with my friends." Considering for a moment, he added. "I just met Fugaku-sama this morning...he seems fine."

The Senju was more than aware that his every utterance would be put under a microscope for fine analysis. Fugaku, while not particularly warm, had done nothing overly negative thus far. Minato only hoped that trend would continue to improve.

"I am pleased to hear that." Hiruzen smiled, before reaching into his desk drawer and withdrawing a pouch that looked to weigh no small amount. "I have taken the liberty of withdrawing an amount of money from the Senju Clan accounts on your behalf. I imagine you'll want a few changes of clothing."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." Minato bowed deferentially, before reaching out to accept the pouch. On impulse, Minato turned to the pictures on the wall and felt a moment of loss at seeing his old face staring at him. Deliberately ignoring that picture, Minato moved

to deceased Nidaime, the man who had made this transition possible.

"We look alike?" Minato did not look away from the picture, sensing his friends moving to flank either side of him.

"You do." Sasuke agreed, looking from Minato to the picture and back again."Except the hair. Yours is nicer."

"Thank you, Sasuke." Minato fingered his long, smooth hair for a moment before tossing it over his shoulder.

"And you smile more." Naruto hummed, narrowing his eyes on the Nidaime's portrait. "He looks like he needs to poop too!"

"Naruto-kun." Mikoto murmured dangerously.

"Eh?"

"You definitely look like my predecessor, Minato-kun." Hiruzen acknowledged, eyes looking almost glassy for a moment. "My sensei was not an expressive man, but he was incredibly devoted to Konoha. Every choice he made was for the betterment of our village. His final act was to stay behind to provide an opportunity for his students--myself included--to return to Konoha safely."

"Just like the Yondaime." Naruto whispered and Minato blinked back a tear. For even a second, Minato wished he could just tell the boy. But even that truth was constrained by the fact that he could never share the real truth with him.

"You kinda look like him, dobe." Sasuke dropped the remark casually, not realizing he had alarmed all the adults in the room. "But you're hardly the type of shinobi the Yondaime Hokage was."

"Like you would know, teme!" Naruto snapped back.

And any chance that Naruto might see underneath the underneath dissolved.

Mikoto sidled over and dropped into a crouch in front of the boys, but her body angled to cater to the blonde. "Naruto-kun." Something set off the alarm bells in Minato's head and it hit him instantly when Naruto tensed next to him. The blonde must have noticed it too. Without a thought, he reached out and interlaced their fingers and squeezed. It was a childish gesture, but they *were* children physically even if his mental state was another story. Minato hardly

cared for propriety when his son was afraid and hurting.

"I want you to come live with us, now. How would you feel about that?" Mikoto spoke to Naruto with a slightly hoarse inflection in her voice that suggested there had been tears shed recently. "I know that you just met us yesterday, but--"

Minato's heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest; Naruto had thrown himself at Kushina's best friend and had broken down instantly. There had been a plethora of wailed promises of good behavior--those would survive an hour or two at best--and endless doubts and restless fears. Fugaku had moved to join his wife and awkwardly crouch down and place a hand on Naruto's shoulder. It was a sign that it would take him time, but his old friend might have what it takes to get there.

Minato felt he should have been prepared for this moment; in fact, he had suspected something happening, but had failed to comprehend just how painful it would be for him. His stomach clenched and Minato himself felt like crying. Why did it hurt so much?

"C'mon, little silver." Shisui picked him up and settled him atop his shoulders and turned to the exit. "Let's give them a moment."

"Naruto..." Minato murmured quietly, feeling like he was abandoning the blonde rather than giving him privacy. Body slumping, Minato was ridiculously grateful for the foul fishy stench clinging to Shisui because it helped him hold back his tears. The office door closed with a dull click, but not before Sasuke darted through behind them and slammed his foot into the back of Shisui's knee viciously.

"Gah!" Shisui screamed.

No time to worry about leaving Naruto, Minato's eyes bugged while Shisui stumbled like a drunken elephant and careened toward the wall. Minato's fingers grabbed for purchase and ended up pinching the chunin's ears. Shisui wailed like a little girl, but thankfully kept his footing even though there was a perceptible limp to the otherwise graceful motions.

"You little brat!" Shisui shouted. Minato cringed and felt sorry for the poor secretaries that had to put up with all this nonsense. Though...considering how vicious the kunoichi at the desk looked, perhaps he should re-evaluate exactly whom he felt sorry for.

"What was that for?!"

"Set him down." Sasuke sounded positively lethal, eyes flashing dangerously and the Senju half-expected the eyes to shift to crimson. "You're unreliable and untrustworthy."

Minato wiggled slightly and Shisui shrugged and set him down next to his friend. While violence was more of a last resort card, Minato appreciated the sentiment and whispered a quick, "good job" to Sasuke who practically glowed from the praise alone.

"Sasuke, you can't just go around attacking people! And I'm always around to help take care of you so I think your definition is in question. Although, your kick was a little--" Oh no. This guy was *supposedly* a genius. Even Hiruzen had asked him to stay during the interrogation yesterday. Admittedly, the older boy had earned a lot of points in his book for how supportive he was yesterday, but the Senju was having serious doubts about the boy's intelligence. "--wimpy. We're gonna have to work on toughening you up."

"Then how about this!"

Sasuke shot forward, executing an impressive feint toward Shisui's abdomen only to reverse and twist backward, making direct contact with Shisui's groin. Minato's eyes ballooned while Shisui teetered sideways clutching his family jewels with a painful squeak before the Uchiha collapsed to the ground.

"Most impressive." The kunoichi behind the desk taunted from behind the lid of her tea. Shisui merely whimpered pathetically. The woman leaned over him, pressing the toe of her sandal to his belly. "You know that you smell like fish, right?"

"He should have been able to dodge that." Minato muttered in confusion.

"He's weaker than Itachi." Sasuke shrugged it off, obviously pumped up about his 'victory.'

Had Shisui gotten hit on purpose? Or had the attack really caught him off-guard. Though, under Minato's suspicious eye, the chunin sat up and looked like he was recovering a bit too quickly. Was it possible Shisui was just...playing along?

"I'm gonna get you back, brat!" Shisui hissed, though now that he was looking for it, Minato found the flash of playfulness. So

his theory had been correct after all; Shisui really was an odd duck. But his spirit was exactly what the village needed. "And not even Itachi can save you!"

"As if I need nii-san to deal with you." Sasuke waved the other boy off.

The door swung open and Naruto trotted out followed by Mikoto and Fugaku. The blonde grinned at the Uchiha hauling himself to his feet.

"What's wrong with gumhead?" Naruto asked as he walked out, looking far less watery eyed and just...happy. Like a young boy should.

"Ah, Sasuke-kun just got him good." Minato bragged on his friend's behalf, watching Naruto color with what had to be jealousy. Ah, youth. "Don't worry though, I'm sure you'll get your chance to gang up on Shisui-san later."

"You're all brats!" Shisui protested, throwing a pleading look to the kunoichi who was pointedly ignoring him behind a familiar orange book--who knew sensei's trash would appeal to women too?

"Can we leave now?"

"I'm afraid not, Naruto-chan." Mikoto responded patiently, making a clucking noise as she squatted and gave the blonde's collar a tug to try and straighten the collar. "We're going to drop you and the other children off to play with the other kids while the meeting is going on. Then, we're going to go shopping."

"I don't like shopping!" Naruto whined.

"Naruto." Fugaku barked, the command doing the trick of freezing the poor blonde in place. "No child of mine will be wearing clothing like you had. They would be unseemly to wear and would reflect poorly upon the clan."

Feeling Naruto's chakra bubble unhappily, Minato quickly slid his arm over the blonde's shoulder. Minato suspected the root of Naruto's hesitation had not occurred to anyone else; reticence was developed from experience and all his son had developed was a list of negatives with very few positives to speak of. It was really no surprise that a boy that expected to be called terrible names and refused

service by more businesses than not would prefer to avoid shopping trips.

A four year old afraid of new clothes, it was a miserable thing to digest even if Minato understood that the world was a harsh place; it was another thing when it was happening to your own flesh and blood--sort of.

"Clans can be very judgmental of each other." Minato felt gratified that Naruto's protests deflated and the blonde seemed to absorb what he was telling him like a sponge. "If you live with the Uchiha Clan, but people see you wearing clothing that is not in good condition, they might say unkind things about Mikoto-sama and Fugaku-sama."

"They would do that?" Naruto looked alarmed, turning to peek up at Mikoto for affirmation and frowned when his new guardian nodded slightly.

"Tou-sama, you wouldn't let anyone say things about kaa-san that aren't true." Sasuke stated matter of factly, looking like the cat that caught the canary when his father inclined his head in a soft nod.

"I would never allow anyone to disparage your mother in my presence." Fugaku agreed, pointedly walking down the hallway, while Minato trailed beside his two friends. "I expect the same from both of you."

"Hai!" The pair chorused with a steely determination.

"Alright, you boys go with Shisui. He'll take you there. We want to make sure we're a little early." Mikoto frowned at Shisui. "Perhaps Shisui should...have another shower."

"I smell?" Shisui gripped his shirt, burying his nose in it before rearing backward. "I smell!"

"Tch, loser." Sasuke grunted at his cousin.

Minato's heart quaked at the sight of his son gathered into the arms of his new mother. Kushina would have been pleased that her son would no longer have to grow up alone, but this left Minato uncertain of how to predict the future. And seeing the woman wrapping both Sasuke and Naruto in a heavy embrace, the Senju felt a pang of loneliness.

He had not given much consideration to his own fate. Senju Tsunade was a legend in her own right, but as the Yondaime Hokage he had seen the medical expert as a mere shell of the woman that his sensei had been not-so-secretly in love with. If the woman was to return, Minato was not convinced that Tsunade would just magically decide to give up a decade of booze and gambling for a stripling she had never met. Of course, Minato hardly required parenting, but he could hardly make a reasonable claim that a four-year old did *not* require looking after. And it was probably better to go along with Hiruzen's suggestion because Danzo's plan for his upbringing would be problematic at best.

"Hey, Sasuke." Naruto chirped as they walked away from the adults.

"Hmm?"

"Does this make us brothers?"

"No." Sasuke deadpanned and Naruto dogged the grumpy boy's footsteps with that feisty resolve that would no doubt wear the other boy down given enough time.

"Ha I'll show you! I'll be the most awesome brother EVER and you'll have to accept me!"

Hopefully this was a phase and not one of those lifelong dedications. Minato had a feeling it was the latter which was in the words of the Nara: troublesome. The Senju could hardly fault his son for being tenacious since it was a rather desirable quality to have in a shinobi, but overkill was still overkill.

"Just think, Shisui-san," Minato tugged the miserable chunin's arm companionably, unaware of the fond smile sliding into place on the non-conformist teen. "You get to deal with both of them all the time now. At least things won't be so boring right?"

Shisui shivered, no doubt his life was flashing before his eyes along with his clothes, hair, and personal hygiene. "Maybe I'll just move in with you, little silver."

"Well, you aren't all bad when you aren't tossing me into freezing ponds." The conference room that Minato had guessed would serve as the 'kid's zone' was just around the corner, so he slipped his hand into Shisui's just the way a youngster might and squeezed two of Shisui's fingers in his small fist. He smiled triumphantly when the

older boy returned the gesture. "Hokage-sama told me that I'll be living with a relative, Shisui. Do you know much about them?"

"Er..." Shisui looked a bit green around the gills, whether it was from thoughts of Tsunade's notorious temper or from that special surprise he had slipped the older boy earlier...who really could tell? Either way, made his day more fun. "Maybe I'll just visit you. I'm sure you're going to need your privacy."

Before any further exchange could occur, they arrived at a door where a tall, string-bean of a man wearing a bandana and sunglasses stood with his arms folded behind him and a smarmy smile on his face. It looked like Ebisu had changed little except perhaps that the jounin was a bit taller now. When exactly did he get that promotion? And how? The man was not...bad, but neither was he particularly impressive in any particular field. How had the man possibly made it through the jounin exams? Perhaps the Sandaime was going senile after all?

"Shisui-san!" The jounin greeted the Uchiha with a polite bow before straightening his glasses as he examined each of his charges; a frown to Naruto, an impressed look to Sasuke, and practically star struck when he spotted the Senju. To say the least, the man was not endearing himself so far. "Young, Minato-kun, Sasuke-kun, it's good to see you with us today."

The man bit back a comment when Shisui crossed his arms and glared.

"Let's go inside Naruto-kun." Minato spoke coldly, pleased when Ebisu took a hasty step backward with his hands lifted in a gesture of surrender. A coward too. How had this fawning imbecile become a jounin?

Sasuke grunted, also shooting the beanpole an unimpressed glare before yanking the door open and pausing. This particular room was devoid of windows and had privacy and protection seals on every wall--if you knew where to look. A few other children were sitting around. While Minato was able to identify just about every clan heir just by looking at them, Hinata was the most obvious rushing their direction closely tailed by a taller Hyuuga boy with his forehead bandaged carrying an infant.

If it was the last thing he did, Minato swore he was going to find a way to remove the curse seal. Of course, the Hyuuga Clan might

just abolish the entire proceedings if he sicced Naruto on them. The thought was tempting and Minato hardly felt inclined to support the heinous practice so he would keep that option open for future reference. After all, if his son became Hokage, he would need an advisor and he certainly could fulfill that duty.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata rushed the doorway, darting forward to greet them all with a huge smile that appeared to have caught the stoic boy behind her off-guard. "Sasuke-kun, Minato-kun. I'm so pleased to see you both!"

"Oh hey there, Hinata-chan!" Naruto buzzed, glancing around behind the girl and waving at the girl's tail. "Gosh he looks just like you, Hinata!"

The other boy looked resigned, but merely nodded.

"Hyuuga Neji." The boy grunted before passing Hanabi to the jounin who had popped a prepared bottle out of nowhere.

"So what are you all doing in there? It looks totally boring?" Naruto stated. For once, Minato readily agreed. There was a table with punch, snacks, and treats, but aside from that, there was craft table and. In the corner, there was a pile of books that had seen better days but aside from that, there was nothing to do.

"Well, this is where all of you will stay while the adults have a meeting." Shisui scratched the back of his head before grimacing sympathetically. "And come on...you all can color...and stuff."

"You mean we just have to sit around while you guys talk all day?!" Naruto appeared outraged, justifiably so in Minato's humble opinion. "Why can't we go to the playground again? It's not like we need you!"

"We're going shopping after this remember." Shisui smirked, standing just outside of arm's reach on the other side of the door. "They have snacks for you guys, games, books. It'll be great. And we'll be done before you know it."

"If it's so great, why aren't you staying?" Sasuke sneered at his cousin.

"Ebisu will be staying and he is an incredible jounin." Shisui looked at the bandana wearing individual in question doubtfully.

Rightfully so, the man was bigoted, prejudiced and potentially a disastrous comrade. Perhaps Gai's eccentricies were a little more understandable having such a lousy teammate. Though, Genma had turned out pretty impressive and fairly normal so maybe it was not such a promising theory.

"Tch, I could take that guy." Sasuke declared after sizing up the man in question who had rushed, Hyuuga baby in one arm, to a table in an effort to appropriate some of the chips from the Akimichi boy who had a death-grip on the bowl.

"Me too." Naruto folded his arms and shook his head vigorously.

"That jounin seems incompetent." Neji offered into the conversation, casting a dubious look at the man failing to retrieve the rapidly emptying bowl. "Hiashi-sama must not have realized what lacklustre shinobi would be caring for us at this time."

"Perhaps he is simply new to his position?" The Hyuuga heiress chimed in, obviously trying to think the best of the unknown man. Minato respected the idealist in the girl, but the former Kage was having trouble swallowing the potential loss of standards that must have occurred as a result of casualties during Obito's bid to destroy the village.

"Shisui-san." Even Minato was realizing that this was going to be a miserable experience. Turning pleading scarlet eyes on the Uchiha blocking the exit, he plead with the other boy. "Can we please go to the park? I swear that we won't run off and we'll wait there until you come back."

Judging from the look on the chunin's face, the answer was a definite no and the group must have sensed it because they all sighed collectively.

"Guys, just give me a break." There was something off about that remark. Searching the Uchiha's face, Minato felt his mood lift a bit as he noticed sweat starting to dot the teen's brow and he shifted restlessly. "The Clan Leaders are meeting and you can't go. End of story. And I have to attend so I can't go with you."

"That's alright," Minato replied with a voice sweeter than sugar. His three friends perked up with interest, apparently keyed into his change of mind and looking a bit hopeful. "I suppose we should say goodbye then, Shisui-kun?"

"I guess." Shisui replied agreeably, but looking a bit confused while continuing to shift in place with a slight grimace.

"Naruto, Sasuke, I have a feeling we won't be seeing Shisui for a while, why don't you give him a nice squeeze." Minato nudged the pair and winked, tipping his head toward the Uchiha with a smirk. Like a switch flipping, the boys responded and lunged forward, wrapping their arms tightly around a suddenly squirmy Uchiha.

"Okay, let go!" There was a sudden edge of panic to Shisui's words and the boys honed in on that weakness like sharks in the water.

"Well, you heard him boys!" Minato cheered, actually impressed by the show of teamwork between the two boys. That had a lot of potential there. Naruto whooped, automatically high-fiving his comrade companionably even if they did not know precisely *why* they were celebrating.

"Brats!" Shisui squeaked, wobbling like an unsteady toddler. The Uchiha recovered rather impressively and lunged at them only to stagger back and grip his stomach and breathe hard. "What?" The older boy gagged, looking confused and suddenly desperate.

"Ah, sorry about that, Shisui-san." Minato truly did have the best teacher. Kushina would have been so proud! "While I was brushing my hair this morning, I was thinking about how you threw me in the pond yesterday. Mikoto-sama spent a long time in the bathroom getting us all cleaned up, so I thought it was only fair you should do the same."

Thunderstruck with awe, his friends were practically vibrating next to him, even Hinata's chakra felt a little giddy. Shisui's confusion morphed into a furious outrage crossed with terror.

"I heard that laxatives keep you in the bathroom for a long time, so I dumped the box into your tea this morning."

"You!" Shisui choked, looking like he was about to reach for a kunai except his face suddenly drained of any remaining color. Like an enemy-nin was on his tail, Shisui bolted away, his shrieks of misery like music to Minato's ears.

"I'm not a prank person," Minato stated coolly. "But he had that coming."

"That was awesome!" Naruto hoisted him into the air with a cheer and Minato basked in the warmth of the moment.

"It was a team effort." Minato accepted the praise humbly as he was dropped back down, encompassing both of them in his victory. "Besides, we're going to need a lot of time to prepare for whatever he does to retaliate since we got him three times today. So we better learn some tricks to help us out!"

"Ano, how are we going to do that, Minato-kun?" Hinata asked timidly.

"Well," Minato remarked smugly."Something only ninja in training learn!"

"Like what?" Naruto asked, eyes round. Sasuke and Hinata were attentive listeners and even Neji seemed to be listening in.

"Well, this is what I have in mind..."

Minato approaches the far wall, paused to concentrate, and very carefully placed his hands and a foot on the wall and takes a few step upward--making it deliberately a bit wobbily. Thankfully, Ebisu was distracted by a very loud, very demanding infant in his arms and most of the other kids are engrossed in their own activities.

"Ta da!" He lifted his hands skyward like some mystical sage. Though his audience proved attentive with both Sasuke and Naruto looking prepared to attack the wall. As was only sensible, Hinata interspersed between the pair and was reaching for his foot.

Well, it seemed everyone knew who the brains of their little operation was. Hinata goggled, nearly retracting her hand when she traced his foot with her palm.

"You are using chakra in your feet?" The question was *almost* a statement, but Minato would count his victories where he could.

"Yes." Minato confirmed, hopping off the wall before they attracted attention before they were ready. "I've been paying attention to shinobi in the village and I felt chakra concentrated in the feet so I figured I would try replicating what they did. I succeeded!"

It was plausible enough to be true. It was impossible *not* to notice ninja running up the side of buildings. And coming from a

sensor of Tobirama Senju's lineage, no one would think too much about the implausibility of his explanation since it wasn't a lie.

"Is that not an ability that one would not normally learn until after becoming a genin?" The Aburame boy was bundled up in an oversized coat that fell well past his knees with miniature shades covering his eyes and a nest of spiky brown hair.

"Eh, who are you?" Naruto shoved a finger at the boy with the sunglasses who looked rather nonplussed by the overt reaction. "You're kinda creepy, dattebayo!"

"Aburame Shino." The boy intoned blankly, earning a bunch of sweat drops from the crowd of children. "You speak at an abnormally high level of volume. I am perplexed by this as my eardrums are functioning normally."

"Huh?" Minato sighed at the question marks circling his son's head like vultures.

"It's nice to meet you Shino-kun!" Minato saluted cheerfully, remembering how reliable the boy's father had been. "I'm Senju Minato and these are my friends." He named them and pointed to each in turn, even Naruto doing a good job of standing up straight. "And I don't know when they teach this exercise." It was not necessarily a lie since Academy curriculum was constantly in a state of flux and some clans were more diligent than others in preparing their children for life outside the Academy. "But I thought it might be fun to learn. Would you care to join us?"

The curt nod was all the answer he needed. Minato waved the group to the ground and they all crouched down crowding together in a circle. It was an interesting experience and it reminded the Senju of moments with his old team would gather beneath a specific shady thatch of trees and have team meetings where they discussed missions, shared Kushina's amazing boxed lunches, and hours of Minato imparting some last minute training before being sent back into the chaos of a warzone.

"I know that Sasuke-kun has already accessed his chakra, but what about the rest of you?"

"Ano, we've just been learning." The Hyuuga leaned forward, looking nothing like her reserved counterparts. Nobility was one thing, but repressing someone's personality was just plain wrong. If they could prevent it, Hinata would not become one of emotionally

repressed drones produced by that clan.

The quiet Aburame that had sat down with them pushed up his glasses up the bridge of his nose in a gesture that mimicked Shibi to a T. Quirks must be genetic or there was absolutely no explanation for this.

"My clan is required to begin understanding chakra at an early stage in order to better comprehend the symbiotic nature of a host to their kikai." The boy spoke astutely.

Minato nodded thoughtfully and pressed a finger to his lips while concentrating. An Aburame's chakra was constantly being drained of reserves. Most never realized that a jounin Aburame likely had chakra reserves that rivalled a Kage, but did not have the ninjutsu repertoire to back it up simply because their kikai required such a large portion of their resources. It was very well possible that Shino had chakra levels close to a genin but was restricted to perhaps 20% of that amount at his age. As his chakra pool grew, that too would change, but for now that was a perfectly acceptable amount.

"Naruto, I've felt you use chakra before, but you probably didn't realize what you were doing." Minato informed him, enjoying the pleasure light up Naruto's eyes.

"You sensed him?" Sasuke asked with interest in his dark eyes.

"Apparently the Senju line that I descend from has an incredibly talented sensory ability." Minato explained, reaching out to grab Sasuke's hands. "If you were to use chakra, I can feel you using it but I could also sense where the chakra is moving in your body."

"You mean you can sense people coming?" Naruto asked.

"Yes." Minato admitted easily, watching the various different reactions with curiosity. His son looked put-out, Sasuke looked seemed a bit envious, but not in a petty, mean way. Even the silent Hyuuga boy looked contemplative.

"That is rather impressive." Shino observed quietly, but otherwise remained silent.

"Can one learn to be a sensor?" Hinata asked. Children, their thinking never failed to amaze him.

"A limited ability can be honed over time, but in the case of a sensor, there is never a true replacement for the real thing. Although," Minato smirked slyly, brushing the girl's forehead and causing her to jump slightly. "I don't think you would need one."

Hinata's eyes widen slightly but Minato quickly changed the subject.

"But we have to be careful. Maybe try using your hands." Minato stood again and willed a concentrated amount before placing both hands on the wall and using his chakra to attach his hands to the side. "If you can get your hands to stick, all there is to do is keep the chakra the same, but direct it to your feet."

Before Naruto could rush forward, Minato tugged him back.

"Can you copy the seal my hands are making?" He clucked under his tongue, sweeping the group that each had a hand on the wall.

"Got it!" Naruto held his hands up in a crude approximation of the ram seal. Kudos for the attempt, right?

"Tuck your finger in a little," Minato poked Naruto's right pinky and adjusted the elbow a bit. "Now describe what you feel."

It was a emotional moment for the former Namikaze. Here he was talking his son through the steps of beginner's chakra awareness. Minato wondered if this is the age that Naruto would have started with them or if he would have started training sooner. To a civilian, four years old was barely past the age of diapers, but it was the beginning of a struggle for survival in the shinobi world. Kushina would have wanted Naruto to have more time, but Minato would have wanted Naruto to start early simply because of the necessity of it.

It was amazing. A little over ten minutes and Naruto already had the hang of it. This was potentially made easier by starting early because an Uzumaki jinchuuriki's chakra reserves make chakra control ridiculously difficult as they age, but starting early just might smooth out some of the bumps his son might otherwise experience.

"Now let it travel down your arm. Can you feel it?" Minato moved so that he was standing next to his son and set his hand on Naruto's shoulder. It was strange being able to sense chakra so keenly, but he could literally feel bubbles of chakra travelling in his son's

body. Following the large bubble, he traced it and felt the flow fluctuate and falter at Naruto's elbow. "Don't give up. I can feel it travelling down your arm. Keep pushing it to your hands."

To his amazement, Naruto did. There was a fire blazing in those blue eyes and he knew this boy was not about to give up anytime soon.

'Just like sensei's story. You sure have guts, kid.'

When he felt Naruto mostly had the hang of it, he dragged him toward the wall where Sasuke was giving his hands the stink eye. Singling the other boy out would make it worse, Kakashi had loathed it when he had done so and he knew that this Uchiha's pride was no different. So he settled for the next best thing; the Senju planted Naruto at the space directly between Sasuke and Hinata--the latter of which had successfully gotten her hands *and* feet to stick, but had trouble maintaining the connection to the wall. Minato would give her a few minutes before the girl blew everyone else out of the water--natural talent was natural talent. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied the older Hyuuga and the Aburame exchanging advice and both looked to be tackling the wall together in a logical fashion. Now *that* was a duo he rather should have expected considering both repressed their emotions albeit for different reasons.

Now, how to explain this exercise in a way that Naruto would be able understand without confusing him. Something that would click would be...ah.

Shaking that off, he set about giving Naruto tips and letting Sasuke feed off of the advice he gave the blonde. "Now Naruto, what would happen if Teuchi-san gave you ramen with only a couple noodles?"

"Eh?" Naruto froze, his chakra faltering before his body automatically continued the flow steadily. "Only a couple noodles? He wouldn't do that to me!"

"I know, but we're pretending." Minato rolled his eyes and shot a wink at the listening Uchiha. Sasuke blanched and quickly looked away. Minato just shook his head; it was not like he cared that his friend was listening in, that was the entire point! "So what would happen?"

"I would still be hungry." Naruto muttered, obviously disgruntled by the idea.

"So too little few noodles would be lousy ramen, ne?"

"Yes." Naruto's face crinkled up making him look like a frowning jiji and Minato just shook his head.

"Okay, so what would happen if Teuchi-san gives you a bunch of noodles, but only one spoonful of soup?"

"But, but, but!" Naruto sputtered. The blonde was so appalled that he did not even notice Hinata shooting him a concerned look from a foot above his head from where she was standing on the wall.

Minato subtly gave the girl a thumbs up and felt a surge of pleasure when his friend only teetered slightly, but hung in there and reconnected her chakra. Thankfully, baby Hanabi was screaming up a storm and thoroughly distracting the panicked looking Ebisu. Minato could not find it in him to feel sorry for the prejudiced jounin. If anything, the man had it coming.

"What would happen?" He continued as if oblivious to Naruto's flustered state of being.

"It wouldn't be ramen...no flavor." Naruto groaned in self-inflicted misery.

"That's right." Minato tapped the wall right in front of Naruto's eyes in an attempt to refocus his son--it mostly appeared to work. "Too few noodles and too many noodles gives you a completely unbalanced dish. What we're doing now is just like that."

"Huh?"

"Your chakra needs to stay even. Not too little and not too much." Minato smiled proudly as the blonde appeared to have a light bulb moment: bingo. "If not, you'll have a bowl of not-so-tasty ramen."

Naruto shivered and turned back to the wall in a fixture of concentration. Minato moved next to Sasuke who was studying the wall with an almost manic intensity.

"Here take my hand." He offered his hands and saw the boy's shoulders stiffen with obvious reluctance. Minato laughed aloud, a light burble of sound that made the Uchiha pause in surprise. "I don't bite, Sasuke-kun. I just thought if you felt my hand while I was molding chakra it might give you a better idea....but I'm not going to

make you."

"Oh."

"Here." Minato was not unsympathetic to the chagrined looking Uchiha that was tentatively reaching out his hand. Taking initiative, he kept his touch as clinical as possible and immediately channeled a chakra into his hand, taking pains to keep the flow even.

"Is that?" Sasuke's eyes had flared wide at the sudden tickle of power. It was a technique that few jounin bothered demonstrating because it never occurred to most. But Minato had always favored the perspective that teaching by experiencing was sometimes the better bet. In this instance, he felt his beliefs had paid off.

"That's how my chakra feels. Can you tell how much?" In response to his question, Sasuke's second hand moved up to *feel* around the sides of the chakra only to fall away after a moment.

"I think I'm ready to try again." Sasuke eyed the wall.

Stepping away, Minato returned to the wall where Neji and Shino were taking their first steps and to his immense pride, Hinata was assisting Naruto who was tottering like a newborn bird, but not slipping and not falling.

"Good job, Naruto-kun." Minato carefully took a step up and made a beckoning motion to the frowning Sasuke. "You can do it, Sasuke-kun. Come!"

His gamble with their smaller chakra reserves paid off. That and a little coaching on the side. Sasuke took a step. For a moment, Minato thought the boy was going to topple, but something steely crossed the Uchiha's face and he took a step. Then another. And another.

"You made it teme!" Naruto shouted and would have fallen over if it had not been for Hinata's firm grip fisted in his shirt.

"Naruto-kun!" The Hyuuga--no, the kunoichi in training snapped, jerking Naruto out of his excitement. "You need to be careful or you're going to fall!"

"Sorry Hinata-chan!" Naruto looked rightfully cowed and Minato wondered if this was a bit of history in the making with the crooked smile he was showing the unimpressed Hyuuga heiress.

Minato was more than pleased the girl was putting her foot down; it would be good for both of them in the long run.

"Oi, isn't it a bit troublesome to learn to do that?" It was a dead giveaway whose child that was without turning to look. But that was no reason not to be polite!

"It looked fun!" Minato turned, flashing a wave to the Nara heir who was being trailed by Chouji who had obviously hijacked dessert tray while the moronic jounin was distracted, and a Yamanaka female that looked both envious and incensed at the same time. Yep, Inoichi's daughter for sure.

"How are you *doing* that?" The feisty Yamanaka groused, shaking a fist at them.

"It's awesome isn't It!" Naruto cheered and Minato despaired. It seemed his offspring had definitely not learned the dangers of antagonizing the fairer sex.

"As if we'd tell *you*." Wonderful. The Uchiha's feathers had been rankled by the girl.

The Aburame and Hinata's cousin had paused, but helpfully *not* offered up any additional commentary.

"Why you!" The Yamanaka was turning an unattractive shade of puce and Minato flinched before recovering. At least she had not tattled on them to the jounin. Now *that* would be troublesome.

"I just worked it out." Minato spoke, but directed his comment toward the Nara in a likely futile hope that he would prove to be the sensible leader of the trio. "I could try to show you if you're interested."

"It does look kinda neat." The Akimichi offered while stuffing dango into his mouth.

"I'd rather nap." The Nara yawned widely, showcasing his clan's rather spectacular lack of motivation.

"Shut it, Shikamaru!" The blonde popped up behind the Nara and smashed her fist into his head eliciting a shout of misery from the brunette.

"What's going on here?" Ebisu, finally holding a quiet

Hyuuga infant, appeared only to recoil in shock at the group of small children standing horizontal on the wall. "W-what? What are you all doing?"

Minato considered all the possible outcomes to his scenario before settling for a sturdy nod and commanding prompt.

"Scatter!"

With that, the newest Senju raced up the wall until he was racing upside down along the ceiling toward the opposite side of the room from the shocked jounin. It didn't take long for his other friends to pursue and soon enough, the room was filled with the shouting of Ebisu, ceiling footsteps, the renewed screaming of Hyuuga Hanabi, and warcries from Uzumaki Naruto. Minato wondered if anyone would bother checking on them.

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There had been drastic changes for Konoha in the last twenty-four hours. And Sarutobi Hiruzen would not have been a Hokage had he not exploited the opportunities that had fallen into his lap. The meeting had ended, but instead of the room emptying, clan members had remained to mingle and discuss what had gone on.

The only one that had immediately departed after the meeting was Danzo. It had been a stroke of luck that had prevented the old warhawk from confronting him last night, but Hiruzen knew that he would fair much worse this afternoon. Contrary to what everyone believed, the Sandaime was more than aware of his old friend's little project. The fact that he *allowed* Danzo some leeway was simply because the man was damned useful. If necessary, he would show his old friend what an end to his leniency would mean for the so-called Yami of Shinobi.

When he had announced the discovery of a Senju heir, there had naturally been a demand for details from Koharu. The Sandaime had tailored his responses, but had admitted that Tsunade had been recalled to raise the boy. Strangely out of character, Danzo had remained silent through the proceedings, but Hiruzen had known that his old friend was incredibly attentive despite his silence. Of course, once he announced his decision to place the Senju heir with the Uchiha Clan, the first voices of dissent made themselves known
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from Hyuuga Hiashi.

No shinobi in Konoha that held the rank of jounin was unaware of the escalating rivalry between Fugaku and Hiashi. If it was not haughty stares in the street, there may have been unsanctioned sparring matches that had required intervention on more than one occasion in the intemperance of youth. So naturally it was no surprise that the Hyuuga Clan Head was quick to protest the placement of young Minato.

What no one could have anticipated was Hizashi stepping up and voicing his disagreement publically with his brother. Hiruzen was not often surprised, but he had paused. Even Fugaku had been taken aback at the defiance of the branch brother to the main family at a meeting of such importance. Not only that, but Hizashi had formally approved of the placement and *suggested* that the Hyuuga Clan host not only Minato, but young Sasuke and any other friends they wished to invite, to dine with the Hyuugas as friends at least twice a week.

Of course, Chouza just had to add his two-cents and invite all of the Clan Heads for a barbecue at the Akimichi Clan residence later that week. The Sandaime was sure that would have sparked some churlish rebuttal since the Akimichis were possibly one of the smallest ranking clans in the village but another miracle occurred. Uchiha Mikoto, possibly spurred on by Hizashi's outlandish behavior, had agreed to the Hyuuga's proposal *and* further countered by insisting that Hinata be allowed to visit with them at once a week. Of course, Mikoto had slyly slipped in a final comment to Chouza stating that the whole of the Uchiha Clan would be in attendance even if no one else showed. Of course, that lead to *all* clans agreeing to show, much to the giant redhead's delight.

Privately, Hiruzen was thankful that Tsume was out of the village. The Inuzuka was loyal to a fault, but he just *knew* that things would have gone wrong at some point if the feral woman had been present.

His plans from the previous evening had borne fruit as well when Fugaku publically submitted a request to Aburame Shibi regarding an invitation to join the police force. The Clan Head had not been able to provide an affirmative yes immediately, but the fact that the man had seemed interested and was currently engaged in a quiet discussion off to the side with the Uchiha patriarch was promising.

The only oddity was that Uchiha Shisui was absent when he had specifically ordered the chunin to be present...that would have to be investigated later. His tolerance for Hatake Kakashi's tardiness notwithstanding, his patience did have limits.

"You didn't mention Uzumaki Naruto." Shikaku sidled up next to him with his arms folded as he studied the interaction next to his leader.

"The protection of a jinchuuriki is the concern of the Hokage. It is not up for discussion." The quiet censure was accepted and the scarred man scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Besides, I think enough was covered today."

"Today's outcome was unexpected." Now that was interesting. For the results of today to be unpredictable to *the* Nara was perhaps a once in a lifetime phenomena. And for Shikaku to admit so was equally troubling.

"Most of us knew what was being discussed today." Hiruzen nodded quietly. "But Mikoto and Hizashi pulled out a result that should not have been possible. A gathering of clans outside of this meeting room...even if it was not intended to be one, is monumental in the history of Konoha."

"All for the better." Hiruzen advised quietly. "This is the best chance we have to bring our young back into the fold.

"Danzo and his cronies will burn you with this if we're wrong, Hokage-sama." Shikaku advised, clearly analyzing the individuals in the room in an attempt to make sense of everything.

"We, Shikaku?" Hiruzen asked, amused.

"I'm starting to believe that you might not be entirely insane." Shikaku sounded almost wistful and Hiruzen saw years fall off the man's face for a single moment in time. "Change is on the horizon."

"Is that so?" Hiruzen tugged on the sleeve of the robe that he constantly wore. Despite decades wearing the damned thing, he still longed to cast it off and wear simple shinobi colors and his old helm again. Though he knew that if he ever engaged in a serious confrontation, there would be little guarantee he would survive since every year his bones ached just a little more and his chakra frayed an ounce.

The Sandaime could only hope that his chosen successor enjoyed his next few years because Hiruzen intended to train him into the ground should all move according to plan.

"It looks like Mikoto-sama is holding her own against Hiashi-sama's griping." Shikaku muttered, indicating the matriarch who was shooting an unimpressed look at the surly Hyuuga. "I did notice the hitai-ate today...does that mean?"

"I've reinstated her under your division." Hiruzen remarked casually, delighting in the startled look on his favorite advisor's face. "Her duties will be constrained until the children enter the academy, but having Mikoto on active duty, however limited, should boost integration with the village."

Spying the matriarch heading for the doorway with the Hyuuga brothers at her heels, Hiruzen made a slight gesture and made to intercept the trio. Shikaku dutifully trailed behind, though he knew the Nara was more curious than he let on.

"This is certainly a great opportunity to meet the next generation." The Sandaime mused aloud, stroking his beard thoughtfully. Addressing the group at the door."Shall we?"

"Of course." Mikoto and Hiashi chorused at the same time, freezing, and shooting each other irritated glares.

Hiruzen took point. Setting a brisk pace, he waved aside the secretary toting forms and made for the conference room. The faint sound of childish screaming met his ears and the only reason he did not quicken his steps was the utter lack of reaction from the ANBU that remained hidden instead of moving to intervene. The volume increased the closer they got and he heard a discontent mumble from Hiashi and a murmur that *might* have been a prayer from Mikoto.

Turning the handle on the door, Hiruzen felt the collective group behind him stiffen up in shocked horror. Every piece of furniture in the room was overturned and fashioned into a crude barricade. The Akimichi boy--who else could it have been--was on his hands and knees collecting bits of fruit and smoked meat from one of the trays that had obviously suffered a violent ending. Hyuuga Hinata had her eyes narrowed beyond the crude barricade with her a cooing bundle in her arms and a fork clutched in one fist that looked to be dripping blood. Shikaku's boy was nowhere in sight and that lead the Hokage to conclude that he had gone into hiding. The main source of

the banshee like screaming, Inoichi's daughter who looked like she had gone swimming in a punch bowl and was hurling spoons at the new jounin Ebisu that the Sandaime had--mistakenly apparently--thought could handle this little task. Said jounin had lost his sunglasses somewhere along the way and had kikai bugs clinging to his eyelids; Ebisu was frantically clawing at the insects in a desperate act of futility. Uchiha Sasuke was racing across the ceiling with Senju Minato unravelling a spool of...was that crafting twine? Uzumaki Naruto had issued a warcry and launched himself from his own spot off a wall wielding a container of plum sauce in one hand and fish sauce in another and squirted Ebisu's face, chest, and backside when the jounin tried to evade the hits.

"Sasuke, Minato, now!" Naruto gave the order like a proud captain would.

Both boys dropped from the ceiling, the twine extending between them and they converged for a moment before racing in opposite directions. A flailing Ebisu was captured for an instant before a white poof of smoke appeared leaving the severed chair leg in the twine job.

Privately the Sandaime was relieved. If Ebisu had failed to pull off a simple substitution, he would have demoted him on the spot. To be honest, he was still considering it given that the only thing left to do was light a Katon jutsu and leave the room a smoldering ruin. As things stood, a couple genin teams would be receiving D-rank missions to...do something with the mess.

"Jiji!" Naruto crowed, racing at him with the speed of a little devil and wagging his fist in the air triumphantly. "We got him good!"

The horrified chakra spikes behind him made up for all the trouble. At last, the clan heads all had something in common.

Sarutobi Hiruzen laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. If you like what you're reading, I encourage you all to review. Thanks!

Chapter 6: Of barbecues and stalkers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Senju Minato was bored. According to Kurama, that was an incredibly tedious state of affairs.

Back in prison of Shinigami's belly, after spending a few years taming the beast in his gullet, Minato had been left with little to do. There were only so many stories he could swap with Kurama before they had traded every store of interest. And there was only so much time one could spend working on jutsu and seals that Minato had naively believed would never see the light of day. Minato had truly come to empathize with the perspective of a tailed beast: being sealed away was painfully boring.

Now that he was not sealed away anymore, Minato felt the itch to explore Konoha again.

After walking in on their little lesson in chakra control, Fugaku had been surprised and a little bit too excited. It became apparent rather quickly that the father viewed accomplishment as an opportunity to push his children--Minato included by default--to their limits. The next day, Fugaku worked Minato, Sasuke, and Naruto into the ground with shuriken and kunai throwing. As if that was not enough, the slave driver pressed them into physical conditioning. Four year olds were not physically capable of strength training--thank god--which prevented some of the more strenuous exercises, but that had not stopped the man from forcing them to perform endless sit-ups, push ups, and throw at target dummies until their fingers trembled.

Mikoto had been more dismayed than impressed by their wall-walking exercise. The kunoichi had admitted that she was proud, but Minato had noted the strain around the mother's eye that seemed to twitch every time Naruto became too quiet. In a four day time span, Mikoto had removed a complaining Naruto from the roof over a dozen times and had forced the blonde to dismantle countless aerial traps that her keen eye had discovered. Sasuke had used his new skills to attempt to stalk his older brother, which ended in a tantrum when the older boy simply dropped him in front of his mother before executing a shunshin to escape.

At least the prank war with Shisui appeared to be settled into an uneasy truce. The last straw had been when a pail of neon green Jell-O spilled across the kitchen floor. A haggard looking Mikoto had rounded up Naruto, Sasuke, Shisui, and Minato--even though the Senju was entirely innocent of involvement. Needless to say, all four of them had spent three hours cleaning every last speck of sticky green out of the kitchen *and* weeded the clan garden as punishment. Since then, the trio had walked on eggshells and left the home prank free for the past two days. Not that it would last with an Uzumaki in the house.

Now, Minato was watching Sasuke and Naruto throw dull shuriken at a practice dummy that Itachi and Shisui had set up that morning. Sasuke was doing exceptionally well for a four year old; the boy threw with considerable accuracy and seemed to have a knack for understanding how to compensate for the weight while throwing. Not that he was making bull's eyes, but with some practice Minato could see the potential there.

Naruto was more of a diamond in the rough and that was being optimistic. His blonde friend threw forcefully, angrily, and his shots had nearly--and accidently, for once--took out Shisui's eye. This might have been impressive if Shisui had not been standing behind and to the right from where Naruto was standing. Still, the Senju was impressed by the blonde's stubborn resilience. Even when his throws flew wide, the boy kept on trying and he never, ever gave up.

Minato probably *should* have been over there 'practicing' his throws, but Itachi had thoughtfully provided him with an actual novel yesterday. When he confronted the older boy about it, the genin had smiled gently, poked him in the forehead, and told Minato that he thought he might like something to read. Considering how Mikoto foisted a pile of children's books on them more than twice a day, the Senju was reluctantly impressed by how perceptive the older boy was. To have noticed his dissatisfaction with the picture books reinforced just how perceptive Itachi was. Minato was positive that Mikoto *had not* noticed so that was rather telling.

The breeze tickled his neck and caused the pages to flutter slightly. Itachi shifted slightly across from him; Minato knew the older boy was reading the scroll in his hands, but somehow Itachi had mastered a level of hyperawareness that allowed him to keep a keen watch on Sasuke and Naruto while continuing to read his book.

Gravel crunched behind him and Minato flipped to the next

page as Fugaku rounded the corner wearing his standard jounin uniform with his attention completely focused on the boys throwing weapons at the targets.

"Naruto throws like a civilian." Fugaku grunted out.

"Then teach him, Fugaku-san." Minato resolutely did not look up from his book despite baiting the Uchiha patriarch."Unless you're no good at teaching."

"You watch your tongue boy." Fugaku raised his voice and stepped closer until the man's shadow blotted out the sunlight. Minato almost smiled when Fugaku's chakra seethed like a frustrated beast from the small boy's utter lack of response. Finally, the Uchiha patriarch stalked away from the chairs toward Sasuke and Naruto while barking instructions at the pair of them. No doubt it would be an unpleasant beginning, but Minato suspected that his old friend would loosen up the more time spent bonding with Naruto.

"You speak your mind quite boldly." Came the frank observation from his reading companion.

Minato calmly settled the bookmark ribbon into place in the middle and turned toward the blank faced boy.

"Misunderstandings arise because of a lack of communication." Minato responded calmly, miming Itachi's expression. "Not speaking out would be worse than being dishonest because it would be enabling his attitude instead of prompting a change."

The Senju was pleased by the thoughtful nod on Itachi's face. Itachi needed a change in perspective before Danzo sank his claws into him.

Turning away, Minato's face lit up like the sun when he saw Naruto leap into the air with a bellow of victory. A shuriken was lodged in the target. Not anywhere near the centre, but hitting at all was a massive improvement. Minato watched Sasuke nod thoughtfully while his father adjusted his arm and the boy grinned when his own shot hit inside the inner ring. Minato's felt his vision narrow and his moisture blur his eyes, and his breathing may have stuttered for an instant when he watched Fugaku bend down and fix the alignment issues in Naruto's stance and whisper quietly in the blonde's ear.

'It should have been me!' he wailed, but already Naruto was

gone and only an empty field, a false sunshine, and imitation fragrance of cedar tickled his nose.

'**Don't tell me you've been falling apart while I've been gone, Minato.**' *The fox's chakra washed over his own like a warm familiar blanket and Minato turned and latched onto one of the bijuu's paws greedily. Minato had known it would take time, but he had been unprepared for just how long his old friend would be out of contact. It had been a week since they had last spoke and after being together constantly for sixteen years, to suddenly not have Kurama to fall back on had made the Senju feel incomplete.*

'I haven't!' He answered far too quickly and Minato knew the fox would be able to sense any dishonestly on his part. 'It's just difficult seeing what my life should have been.'

'**You're really pathetic when you mope like this.**' *Kurama's rebuttal stung painfully and all the more because it resounded with truth.* '**Minato, that ship sailed. How long is it going to take for you to get it through your head that Uzumaki Naruto is not your son. Not anymore.**'

'It sounds so logical.' Minato did not bother concealing the bitterness in his voice. 'But when things happen right in front of you....'

'**Would you rather Naruto was alone in his apartment?**'

'No.' He spat out, looking up from his furry nest into the large scarlet orbs of the Kyuubi no kitsune. 'No, I just--'

'**You need to let go, gaki. The only thing you're doing by clinging to these emotions is hurting yourself and making it more difficult to transition. Take a walk, clear your head, but you need to let go.**' *Kurama snorted, leaning down to rest his head on his paws. Minato blinked, realizing just then that the giant fox's ears were drooped and that the massive bijuu radiated exhaustion.*

'Are you okay, Kurama?' Minato edged closer, until he was directly in front of the fox's enormous, scarlet eye.

'**Establishing a connection with my siblings was more taxing than I expected.**' *The bijuu snorted, his downy tails swishing up to curl around the enormous fox.* '**We'll have to discuss the details later.**'

Which implied that Kurama had expended too much energy and

needed some time to recoup some chakra.

'I'm sorry, Kurama.' The boy retreated from the large fox, staring around the artificial landscape with its fragrant blossoms, false sunshine, and mimicked birdsong. Bending down, he ran a finger over the admittedly impressive recreation of a valley and fingered a single, pink flower and lifting the silky petals to his nose and inhaling memory itself.

'**Letting go is difficult, Minato.**' *Kurama's tone dropped.* '**I understand better than anyone how difficult it is to let go of something. For years I've been alone allowing my fears to fester in tandem with my hate. I'm not one to bother with something as paltry as regret, but I'm thankful I met you. If not, I may never have known what it was like to be free of my hate. I had to let go…just as you now must let go.**'

'Kurama.' Minato froze, feeling tears again sting his eyes, but as they fell nothing but soft joy filled his being. Sometimes it was easy to forget how much they had been through together. And sometimes it took a bijuu to teach a human a lesson. 'Thank you.'

'**Beat it.**' *Kurama deflected, sounding increasingly discomfited.*

'Let go, huh?'

The Senju stared at his reflection in the dew of an imagined flower, but no matter how he looked at it, he realized that Namikaze Minato really was gone. The joys, the sorrows, and the knowledge was still there, but Minato finally was beginning to understand. There was no going back, but there was no going forward as long as he continued to cling to old pains.

Emerging from his mindscape was always interesting. But no more than a second had passed and Minato felt much more confident and much more collected.

"I'm going to the restroom." Minato murmured, a smile tugging at his lips as he offered the book to Itachi with a wide grin. "I'll finish later."

Itachi barely nodded when the Senju dashed inside and actually did use the restroom, but then he stopped by his bedroom. Rummaging through his belongings, Minato snagged the leftover ryo that Hiruzen had given him after a pricey shopping excursion that involved procuring several changes of clothing and a formal yukata for the upcoming clan barbeque that the Akimichi's were hosting.

Cash pocketed, the Senju extended his senses and discovered Naruto and Sasuke heading back toward the main door of the house. Perfect. Slinking across the hallway like a cat, Minato poked his head into the kitchen and called to Mikoto.

"We're going to go play outside, Mikoto-sama." Deliberately he did not specify where since he had no interest in lying to the woman.

"Are Itachi and Shisui outside?"

"They sure are!" Minato chirped. "I think Fugaku is going to work soon."

"Have fun." The matriarch was totally engrossed in her chopping and never looked up.

Taking a final sensory sweep of the back yard, he felt Fugaku's chakra distance itself from the others. Concentrating harder, Minato felt Shisui and Itachi were near each other and had yet to follow Naruto and Sasuke who were retreating toward the door. Even better!

Naruto and Sasuke were rounding the corner, about to step into the house when Minato breezed past, snagging both of their sleeves and rushing around the corner.

"Hey what--?" Minato held a finger to his lips and Naruto instantly quieted, eyes growing alert and much more excited at the prospect of something interesting going on.

"Shh!" With a finger he waved his hand and scurried down the back lane toward one of the back walls of the Uchiha Compound.

Minato was more than aware that it was reckless, impulsive decision, but he had never done well with being cooped up. The Hiraishin was an incredible military advantage, but it was also a tool that promoted freedom. He had forgotten what it tasted like so he was all the more determined to go have a little fun with his friends.

"We're sneaking out?" Naruto asked without objection, even looking kind of excited at the notion.

Sasuke looked slightly torn and Minato felt more than a little guilty for being the cause of such uncertainty.

"Stay." He dropped a hand to the other boy's shoulder and cocked his head with a light smile. "I doubt anyone is going to be very happy that we went out without supervision anyway so it may be for the best."

"Nah, kaa-chan will be fine!" Naruto blew off his concern with a dismissive wave before leaping at the wall and racing over. "Last one over is a rotten egg!"

"Sasuke-kun, you don't need to come, it's fine--"

The tiny Senju's reassurances were cut short when the Uchiha all but dragged him up and over the wall with neat, acrobatic motions.

"Where to?" Sasuke's nose wrinkled up as he surveyed the back lane that was empty save for a scruffy looking stray cat and a tipped over garbage can.

"Ramen!" Naruto cheered!

"No." Sasuke retorted flatly.

"Sasuke..." Naruto looked crestfallen.

"We had it twice this week! Twice!" Sasuke popped the blonde on the head with a heavy fist, while agilely sidestepping a retaliating strike. "We're not having it again."

"Today is an adventure." Minato murmured, drawing the attention of the other boys. "We can do whatever we like."

"Can we start at the monument?" Naruto asked while staring at the ground and scrunching his sandal into the earth.

"Yeah." Minato responded right away, unable to pinpoint the source of Naruto's sudden shift in mood but wanting to help his friend all the same.

"Sure."

The trio exited the back alley and joined the throngs of people going about their business. Konoha was vibrant and bustling in the early afternoon hours. The streets were filled with civilians and ninja alike going in and out of stores. Laughter spilled freely from where clusters of old women had tea at outdoor cafes. Small children

clung to their mother's skirts and dodged wagons of goods and a genin team darting through the crowd after a speedy feline. Konoha was a happening place and one would never have known that such a peaceful place had ever been attacked.

To Minato's astonishment, no one seemed to connect the well-dressed blonde boy to the village pariah. The Senju was aware that it would only take a few outings like this before the cat was out of the bag and people connected the dots. For now though, Naruto had been afforded a brief period where he did not have to worry about misdirected anger.

The top of the Hokage Mountain was an unforgettable view and well worth the trek up to the heads of the Kage. Naruto lead the path and it was obvious that it was already familiar to him and the boy instantly lead them to the Yondaime's head.

"You can see everything from up here." Sasuke looked down, showing no indication that he was afraid of the falling distance. "Pretty cool, dobe."

"Someday my face will be up here." Naruto remarked with something more than bravado staining his voice.

"Then you better watch out, dobe." Sasuke moved forward until he was shoulder to shoulder with the Uzumaki. "Because you won't be beating me any time soon."

"That's what you think, teme!" There was no anger in the rebuttal, only the beginnings of a new rivalry.

"Let's all work hard." Minato took the place on Naruto's other side, staring down at the people he had already died defending. Seeing the screaming children with smiles on their faces, the Senju can't say his decision would have been any different. "I would like to see Naruto achieve his dream with us by his side."

"Together then?" Sasuke called out, his voice carrying on buffets of wind.

"You got it!" Naruto whooped, throwing his fist up in the air and hollering down at the disinterested crowds of civilians. "Look out everyone! Uzumaki Naruto is going to be the next Hokage."

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From the relative safety of the rooftop, a tall figure crouched as three boys passed beneath the eaves of the building. The man had followed them to the monument and back down again, while keeping out of sight.

Flexing his fingers, the stalker made a formed signs faster than most could read before slamming his palm on the ground.

"Kuchiyose no jutsu!"

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permeating the air.

"Can I help you, boys?" An older man wearing an apron called out to them from behind the counter where a display case showed dozens of different sweets to order. Naruto had moved instantly to place himself behind Sasuke; Minato exchanged a grim look with his other friend who shook his head once.

Appetite nearly lost, Minato walked up to the counter and placed a few, folded bills on the counter and quietly asked for a box of cinnamon buns to go. The exchange was quick and pleasant enough until Minato noticed a slight hardening in the baker's expression when he stared at Naruto for a few seconds too long.

"Thank you." Minato forced out, all but dragging his companions out of the stifling shop that no longer smelled so appetizing. At least Hinata would enjoy the box of goodies.

"What do you guys want to do now?" Naruto asked, once again vibrating with excited energy now that he was no longer under scrutiny.

"I don't know." Minato shrugged, gesturing down the lane of colorful signs from different vendors. "Want to explore?"

"Long as we don't go near another clothing store." Sasuke declared.

Minato shivered and nodded. "Let's head toward the park where we all met and see if we want to stop anywhere along the way?"

Sasuke just turned and nearly vanished into the crowd with Naruto quickly running after the Uchiha. Before the blonde vanished, Minato snagged Naruto's sleeve and used that to keep up with the other boy. There was a lot of weaving and darting before finally the crowd broke and they were able to walk side by side.

"Why is it so crowded?" Sasuke grumbled.

"I think it's always like this." Naruto replied absently.

Just as he was about to propose they just head to the park, Sasuke darted toward a store that lacked the overly bright signage and posturing of the other vendors. Following Sasuke over, the trio collectively gasped and pressed their faces against the glass.

Gleaming iron blades were suspended in the window showcasing sharpened edges. The sign above suggested the store was for shinobi customers in particular.

"Let's go in?" Sasuke reeked of hopefulness.

"Heck yeah!" Naruto exclaimed while Minato confined himself to a slight nod and followed the boys that were all but foaming at the mouth.

Right away, Minato turned his attention to the register and felt his jaw loosen. Kaiba Rei was a member of the old guard. The man was a retired jounin that had lived a long enough life to see grey hairs and become wise enough to retire early. While he had not been close friends with the man, Minato believed this individual would allow them to browse without chasing them out of the store simply because of what Naruto carried.

His instinct proved correct when the old timer simply, tracked Naruto and Sasuke to where they were drooling over spools of ninja wire and exchanging hushed whispers, and shook his head.

Minato ambled past a section devoted to trap construction, past the travelling sections with a range of camping gear to seasonal apparel, and finally made it to the last row that seemed...not exactly unkempt, but definitely under-stocked and easily overlooked. Fuinjutsu supplies were a dying breed after all. The Senju reached his fingers out and touched packs of pristine chakra paper and felt a longing inside like no other. More than anything, he wanted to plunk every last ryo on the counter and escape with his arms full of ink, brushes, and precious paper.

Perhaps it was his former life, perhaps it was the Senju blood, or perhaps it was an amalgamation of the two. From the day he read the read history of the Nidaime Hokage at the Academy, Namikaze Minato had been inspired. Initially it had been to satisfy his curiosity toward the Hokage that seemed to have been only a footnote in the shadows of the other two. What Minato learned had shaped the man he would later become.

The Nidaime Hokage had mastered suiton chakra to levels never before seen. Yin Release. Yang Release. Sealing jutsu that allowed for virtual teleportation. Kenjutsu and deadly genjutsu. The man was incredible but ultimately overshadowed by the sheer power of his brother...and forgotten. Minato had been terribly sad at that

little realization, but had been determined to reach for a portion of that greatness himself. Jiraiya had been the boost he needed to understand and two begin the process of crafting greatness. Eventually rebirthing the legendary Hiraishin into his own improved format.

And now, Senju Minato was painstakingly talliying the cost of the supplies and was desperate to find a way to familiarize himself with his old friends. The store owner would never sell supplies to anyone his age, but there were always active duty shinobi that could make such a purchase. Hiruzen would probably do it, but the consequences of asking him would cost him the freedom of unhindered work. The parents were out for similar reasons. That left...Shisui or Itachi. Both absolutely loyal to Konoha and both liable to betray him in a heartbeat.

Staring at the pile of chakra paper mournfully, Minato froze in place as something familiar brushed his senses. Minato wiggled his toes and shook his head, attempting to get a sense of just what--there! Out of the corner of his eye, he spied a flicker of movement and a shadow through the glass. Whipping around to look, the silver haired boy gaped at the empty window and the lack of chakra presence.

Something....something was not right.

Following his gut instinct, Minato eyed his friends playing tug-of-war over some bauble that they were not going to be allowed to purchase anyway, and slipped outside. The noise had diminished and there was space to freely walk without worrying about colliding with someone. Still there was...something. ANBU? Perhaps. But still, Minato felt something small like a burr against his skin scratching away. Chakra but not typical it felt...fresh and vibrant. Fluid like--ah!

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw slight movement from a chair next to a particular bookstore. Before he could think better of it, the pint size Senju was running full tilt across the street. The seated subject stiffened in alarm at his approach and Minato's tactical mind ran a sequence of a thousand scenarios; first discarding one idea and then the next, until finally an idea clicks into place.

Skidding to a stop, Minato takes a deep breath and sidles almost casually toward his vested target, admiring the hitai-ate on the furry forehead.

"Hi!" Minato is not ashamed to play on childish nature. The brown pug blinked at him, before shifting into a sitting posture.

Knowing who was more than likely inside and observing just made him play up his age just a bit more than normal with a bright smile. "I'm sorry to bother you...but I noticed you felt different. Are you a summon?"

"You sensed me?" The question came out in a low rumble and the dog tilted his head to the side.

"Your energy feels different than a persons." Minato chirped. Minato hardly imagined the slight movement behind the tinted glass of the specialty bookstore. "Closer to the world rather than separate from it."

"That's quite impressive." The dog replied finally, performing a full-body shake. "Most sensors overlook us as regular animals and are not able to differentiate the two. You must have quite a talent in that noggin of yours. What's your name, pup?"

"I don't think I'm that special." *Only the rest of the world thinks that.* Minato dropped to his knees so that he was eye level with the canine and extended a hand. "I'm Senju Minato!"

"I'm Pakkun." The dog extended a paw and pressed it to his home and they shook carefully like a pair of dignitaries.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Pakkun!"

Minato stifled a giggle as a tendril of the suppressed chakra in the store made an appearance before being squished down again. Poor Kakashi. His new aniki was probably having a panic attack and behaving in the only manner he found logical. It was a sad fate when stalking became the logical option, but he would never blame Kakashi. How could he when all of this was possible because of him?

"Likewise!"

"Minato-chan!" It seemed rather amazing that glass hadn't shattered. Pounding feet and his two friends arrived to flank him on either side, huffing and puffing.

"Pakkun, these are my friends, Naruto." He aimed at the spot to his left where the chakra was fizzing like soda pop. Flicking a finger toward the more temperate signature. "And Sasuke."

"You're talking to a dog?" Naruto's voice raised a decibel.

"I'm no common mutt, gaki!" Pakkun's fur stood up as the small, but lethal canine snapped forward until he was nose to nose with Naruto.

"GAAAAAAAAHHH!" Naruto surged a foot into the air and fell over with a startled scream. Minato and Sasuke exhaled mirroring sighs.

"Don't mind the dobe." Sasuke said blandly while falling into a short bow. "He's defective. "

"I'll show you defective, teme!"

It was amazing how different the reactions were between a clan raised four year old and a youngster like Naruto that probably never realized how many techniques were used every day by the shinobi around him.

"Naruto-kun." Minato said fondly and used the opportunity to reach out and drag the blonde down by the collar before he could do something foolish. "Pakkun is a special dog that works with a ninja as a partner."

"That's so freaking cool!" Naruto exploded, looking like stars were about to burst out of his eyeballs. "Can I be your partner?"

"Definitely not." The dog rebuked the blonde causing his son's face to screw up in some harebrained scheme of retaliation. "I already have a satisfying partnership and no reason to alter that contract."

"Oh."

Pakkun took a sniff, his nose twitching sharply as he eyed shrewdly. "Someone in your house summons cats!"

"My Kaa-san does."

"She does?" Naruto perked up hopefully.

"She does. But I've never seen her do it more than once because she says it's disrespectful."

"A summoner should only call their familiar when they require assistance. Frivolous summonings are not supported." Pakkun nodded thoughtfully. "You mother seems fairly wise for someone who

spends time with...felines."

"Oh! Oh!" Naruto alternated bouncing on each foot with a wide grin. "Then you must be on a mission right now!"

Well done, Naruto! Son or not, Minato felt a broad sense of accomplished pride when Naruto put that together. Even if Minato knew that spying on a newly discovered little brother hardly constituted normal 'mission parameters.

Feeling inclined to save the canine before his eyes literally popped out of his head, Minato said. "Naruto-kun, if Pakkun has a mission he can't tell us! Missions are classified." Not all of them of course, but children rarely knew that.

"Too true, pup!" Pakkun sputtered, before smoothly recovering. "Speaking of missions...I really ought to get back to work."

"Makes sense." Sasuke shrugged.

"Ah, darn." Naruto looked somewhat crestfallen.

"Missions are dangerous, right?" Minato idly looped a strand of silver around his finger.

"They can be." Pakkun admitted cautiously. Minato simply smiled and ignored his tingling senses that were going into overdrive. "I was going to take my friends for anmitsu before the park. Are you sure you don't want to come? I would get one for you too?"

Minato knew he had already won the round. It had been a happy accident that Kushina had offered Pakkun a bowl at their house one afternoon. And an even more delightful day when Kakashi had stormed into his office snarling and accusing Minato of turning his dog into an addict. Kakashi's real objection probably stemmed from how overpriced the street vendor version of the dessert was which was probably impacting his wallet a little harder than normal.

There was definitely some movement behind the glass, but Pakkun appeared deliberately oblivious and hopped down in delight.

"Lead the way, kiddo! My partner can wait!"

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For a moment, there is only the crackle of his sandals over dry grass, the call of birds, and the wind causing the branches to sway and leaves to rustle. As Minato runs, gusts of air tug at his hair and he runs away from the sound of racing footsteps with his heard pounding and his breath coming in hard gasps.

After procuring anmitsu earlier, the group relocated to the park to eat the fruity dessert. There, Naruto had been the first finished after gobbling his down with boisterous gusto. The blonde had instantly run over to the play structure and ran up the post vertically to the top. The other kids were quick to leave after Naruto started screaming like a loon from the literal top of the structure. After that, Pakkun had been quick to stay, citing a desire to see how talented they really were.

The dog had put them through their paces--after leisurely consuming his dessert, of course--and declared himself the enemy while their 'team' tried to escape. Eventually these tactics had lead to the trio racing into a copse of trees and starting to use the cover of branches, overgrown grass, and natural speed to evade capture. It actively raised the spirits and was a legitimate exercise in stealth. Much to his surprise, his 'team' was excelling considering their age and lack of experience.

"Well, well, well." Shisui's voice called out sounding sharp and frayed as it never had before, interrupting Minato's move to run up his tree again. "Look what we have here."

"Shisui-kun!" Minato abandoned his mission and raced toward the irritated looking Uchiha teen and wrapped his arms around the boy's knees and flashed him a smile. "We've had so much fun!"

The older boy's frown melt away to a hopeless smile while a hand ruffled his hair affectionately.

"You guys have been gone for a couple hours, little silver. Do you have any idea how much trouble you could have been in?"

"We're not going to be in trouble?" Naruto exploded out of a bush bringing with him a shower of twigs, dirt and leaves into the air. The blonde spun in a circle performing a happy dance. "Woohoo! We snuck out AND we got away with it! Best day ever!"

"I might still tell on you!" Shisui snapped, but Minato felt the fingers smoothing through his hair tremble a little less with each

repetition so he just snuggles in deeper and rests for a moment and enjoys stealing a bit of the warm body heat.

Itachi appeared at Shisui's shoulder holding a bag and strangely enough, the cinnamon buns they had secured on the park bench before...blitzing off. The genin simply stares at the trees that rustle again before Pakkun's backside appears. A moment later and the entire ninken emerges leading a dishevled Sasuke by the hem of his shirt.

"He got me." Sasuke remarked with his eyes cast to the ground and hands balled into fists.

"If you managed to evade capture for any length of time, I'm rather impressed otouto." Itachi's voice was like a spell, banishing Sasuke's sullen mood and replacing it with joy.

"Nii-san!" Sasuke cried.

"Oh, so this one is your brother, Itachi." Pakkun snorted, looking mildly amused.

"Nii-san!" Sasuke looked like a startled bird. "You know, Pakkun?"

"Ah, we've met once." Pakkun deflected like a pro. "Got some pretty sharp kids here, Uchiha."

"Very true." Itachi replied gravely. "Thank you for watching over them until we arrived."

"No problem." The ninken stretched his legs. "I better be off. I'll be seeing you all around."

"Bye Pakkun!" Naruto shouted.

"Goodbye, Pakkun." Minato smiled, glancing to the tree line where Kakashi's chakra was nearly undetectable. "I hope to see you again."

"You can count on it,pup." The dog called, tilting his head slightly. "You kids are interesting. Later."

There was a distinctive poof of white smoke and the ninken was gone.

"So cool!" Were those stars in Naruto's eyes?

"I wonder if Kaa-san would let me sign her contract." Sasuke bit lip.

"No way!" Naruto's fist shot into the air jubilantly. "*I* am going to sign the cat contract."

"Not a chance, dobe!" 'Definitely not, Naruto. Bunta would croak for real.'

"Back on topic!" Shisui interrupted, snagging them all into a giant, squishy embrace that was far too tight across the ribs and made him squeak like a trapped mouse. This time at least, Minato would stop resisting and he would try enjoying himself. Maybe he did deserve that much after all.

"What are you guys going to offer me if I don't spill the beans on your little foray into the big, bad village?"

"Why would we offer you anything?" Sasuke's voice was brimming with accusation and suspicion.

"Because you little brats are the cause of my suffering and unless you want me to tell dear old mum and dad what you've been up to, you're going to cough up something that *I* want."

"Shisui-kun," Minato gave Shisui '*the look.*' Rin had used it on him on more than one occasion and it had worked like a charm. The Senju felt a surge of triumph when a shimmer of guilt darkened Shisui's eyes for an instant only to be sabotaged by friendly fire.

"You're gonna do what we say or we're gonna prank you!" Naruto hollered.

"Yeah, I don't think so, tough guy!" Shisui leered dangerously. Naruto's bravado wavered and he retreated cautiously, while looking from the blank-faced Sasuke, to the stoic Itachi, and back to the grinning chunin. "You see...you're gonna lay off on pranking me for a while...or else Mikoto-sama will find out about your little trip into the village."

"Blackmail." Minato remarked flatly, not quite fast enough to dodge a gentle cuff to the side of his face.

"We should have expected this." Sasuke picked up a rock and chucked it at a tree.

In the blink of an eye, Shisui snatched the stone from the air and waggled a finger in Sasuke's direction.

"It's a fair deal. No pranks on me for a week." The stone was tossed into the air, while the chunin caught it again without looking. "Take it or leave it."

"We'll take it." Minato snapped. If there was a way of preventing punishment for something that had been his idea, he was all for it.

"Awesome!" Shisui cheered, the sun practically glowing around the fist the Uchiha threw up in the air. Perhaps a genjutsu? "I can sleep in without worrying! Extra winks are coming my way!"

"I can't believe you agreed to that!" Naruto was grasping his chest looking shocked and a little hurt. "No pranks for a week!"

"I didn't agree to that." Minato remarked nonchalantly. "We agreed not to prank Shisui. I'm sure Ebisu is still around if you get antsy, Naruto-kun."

"Who is Ebisu?" Naruto wondered aloud.

"The jounin babysitter that the Sandaime assigned us." Sasuke scowled cutely, neatly twisting behind Shisui when Itachi made a motion toward his upper face. The boy glared at Itachi who merely shrugged and lowered his hand.

"Oh yeah," Naruto's eyes lit up. "That bandana wearing teme."

Minato shook his head and tugged lightly on Shisui's arm. The older boy lit up and turned with him to head back toward into the village toward the Compound. Suddenly Minato darted forward with a surge of inspiration.

"Let's walk back over the rooftops!"

"Yeah!" Naruto matched his speed with a full-tilt dash.

Sasuke, not to be left behind, sprinted forward and matched their pace and they surged up the nearest building and up to the top.

Minato faltered at the edge of the building, realizing the flaw in his plan. Wall walking was well and good, but crossing the

buildings was a skill that could not be taught under these circumstances. A tumble from this height was not something that he could ignore either.

"Sasuke." It was the only warning the little brother had before Itachi had settled his friend atop his shoulders effortlessly.

"Alright." Shisui put his hands on his hips for a second and moaned dramatically. "I guess...that I can take you guys!"

Not to be outdone by his rival, Naruto scaled Shisui's spine like he was climbing a tree. Minato just shook his head before reaching out gripping the chunin's shirt and dragging himself up to cling like a limpet.

"I should have signed the Sandaime's contract." Shisui called cheerfully before running forward with a powerful surge of chakra and bounded across the distance.

"He never offered it." Itachi commented blandly.

"This is amazing!" Naruto shouted full of carefree joy that was reflected in Sasuke's lack of scowl. Minato grinned giddily as the long snowy strands were buffeted by the windy currents.

"Then try this on for size!" Shisui laughed, the muscles bunching again before springing the chunin forward and past Itachi at speeds rivalling a shunshin. The wind battered and chilled their faces and the teen nearly--and definitely deliberately--ran them into a branch from a tree.

Across the village, Minato caught sight of the Hokage monument with the unchanging expressions of Konoha's predecessors. It was not his old face or even Tobirama's that drew him. It was not doubt just a trick of the light, but Minato could have sworn that the Shodai Hokage's face looked like it was smiling.

'Was this your will, Hashirama-sama? If wonder if you could have foreseen an outcome such as this. I know that's impossible but this moment feels like it's suspended in time.'

When they arrived back at the compound, everyone was sporting grins with chilled cheeks. Even Itachi had lost some stiffness and looked nearly relaxed.

"There you are!" Mikoto slammed the door open, jarring

them out of their excitement as they all tensed and stared at the mother tapping a wooden spoon against her knee. Hinata was staring at them all with a shocked look on her face from behind the irate kunoichi. "You're almost late for dinner and just look at you all! Were you rolling in dirt?"

Since her first visit that week, Mikoto had taken a shine to the Hyuuga heiress--particularly after Hinata mentioned that she missed cooking with her mother. Proving there was nothing like a bit of sorrow to draw people closer together, Mikoto had insisted that Hinata join her for meal preparation. Minato had not known the girl for long, but he could already detect a noticeable improvement in the girl's outlook and confidence just for being around Mikoto. That and the girl obviously, painfully needed a maternal influence in her life since Hinata's mother had died so suddenly.

"Welcome back." Hinata piped up from Mikoto's elbow with a pleased smile.

"Yep! Hinata-chan! We got you a treat!" Naruto lunged forward with his arms open wide toward his kaa-san and friend. Mikoto extended her spoon and stopped Naruto's forward motions with ease.

"I don't think so." Minato cringed inwardly at the almost heartbroken look on Naruto's face, but like sunlight banishing the clouds, Mikoto clucked her tongue and ruffled the blond's hair. "I'll give you a hug *after* you boys clean up. The lot of you, into the shower you go! Dinner waits for no one! You've got thirteen minutes! And if you're not done, Hinata-chan and I will be eating by ourselves!"

Sasuke and Naruto broke into a mad dash and crashed into each other inside. Minato stared unimpressed while sandals went flying and insults were traded. When that finally subsided, Minato turned to shine a smile on the Uchiha teen who had wormed his way into his heart.

"I suppose it's safe to get inside. Thanks for carrying us, Shisui-nii!"

The older teen did not say anything, but he reached out and patted his cheek once before giving him a light pat on the back.

"Off with you then, kiddo!"

Minato neatly removed his sandals and raced past the

bathroom that was full of rowdy disagreements and slipped into the bedroom he was sharing with Naruto. Quickly, he tugged out a crisp white shirt and blue shorts to change into and turned to head to the bathroom when something caught his eye in the middle of the bed.

Depositing his change of clothing on the side of the mattress, Minato reached out to brush a finger over one of two plush toys. One was of a toad with the implication leaning toward it being for Naruto. On the other hand, Minato touched the dog plush that looked incredibly similar to Pakkun with a thoughtful finger.

Kakashi. Underneath the dog, Minato noticed was a beginner's kit for fuinjutsu supplies packaged up with a simple unsigned note.

I hope you like it.

Minato's fingers skimmed the note and squeezed the edges of the paper until his knuckles turned white. It made him literally ill to know that his sole surviving student loathed himself so much that he was incapable of meeting in a normal fashion.

'Such pain and doubt in yourself, Kakashi...I can only hope that over time the both of us can heal together. I spent years trying to dig you out of the pain of your father's death and I saw what losing Obito and Rin did. I fear what my death cost you. But this time, things are going to be different. I promise.'

Without a word, Minato ran a fond finger over the top of the supply box and carefully stowed it in the closet before retrieving his clothes and dashing for the bathroom. Tardiness around Mikoto was just plain suicidal.

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Minato roused to the sound of sheets rustling. Snuggling his pillow more firmly, he nearly drifted off again when the sheets pulled away to expose his shoulder to the naturally lower temperature of the bedroom. Reaching to tug the covers more firmly over himself, the weight beside him shifted. Extra bedding was tossed over the half-asleep Senju, and the room's other occupant sighed quietly.

Naruto.

Forcing himself to wake, the crimson eyed boy rubbed his
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eyes with the back of his hand and forced his fingers to concede their death grip on his pillow. Still feeling muzzy, Minato rolled toward the source of the disturbance, lips morphing into a frown when he saw the hunched figure sitting alone on the opposite edge of the bed.

"Naruto?" The name more mumble than an actual word and Minato feels irrationally frustrated with his lack of composure and roughly shook his head from side to side. Satisfied for the moment, Minato crawled across the bed to Naruto and drops into a seated position next to his friend.

"Naruto?" The Senju prompted the other boy carefully.

"Eh?" The sapphire eyes had been fixated on something no one else could see and Minato feels nothing but pain at the sudden burst of expressions that look absolutely forced cross the other boy's face. "Ah, sorry I woke you up. I was just about to go to the bathroom."

Naruto scurried out of the room and Minato allowed it without calling the boy on his absurd misdirection. Knowing sleep would be a while in coming, the Senju dangled his legs over the side of the bed and suppressed a yawn viciously. And waited.

Naruto was quick to return, sliding the door closed behind him, but Minato could see the boy's false expression slip when the blond spied Minato perched exactly where he left him. Naruto looked uncomfortable and liable to take off running, so Minato stayed quiet but placed an inviting hand on the bed beside him and patted invitingly. The moonlight shone dimly through the window, lighting the hesitant footsteps that slowly padded across the room. Minato stared as his small fingers, inspecting them for no other reason except that it would hopefully set Naruto at ease. The ploy seemed to work because the blonde slowly lifted himself back onto the bed and their shoulders brushed from the closeness.

Still, the Senju allowed them to sit companionably in silence. Minato knew that saying anything at this point would undo his patience and set the conversation up for incidental failure. If he desired a genuine reaction from Naruto, Minato would have to let the blonde make the first move. It took Naruto an unprecedented three, perhaps four minutes before finally deciding to speak.

"I'm sorry I woke you up." An expected response really.

"I don't mind." Minato kicked his dangling feet in the air,

unwittingly enjoying himself.

"That's just it." Minato halted his actions and paused thoughtfully as he analyzed the hoarse pain in Naruto's voice. "Why don't you mind? Why are you different from everyone else?"

It was a difficult question that could be answered in any number of ways. Lying was by far the easiest method, but it was a quick fix that would not solve anything in the long-term. That and any lie would eventually unravel once Naruto discovered the truth for himself. Therefore...diluted honesty was perhaps the best option.

"I like you." Minato cleared his throat, puzzling for a moment when he sensed a chakra signature flickering nearby. "The world isn't a fair place, Naruto. Not everyone is treated fairly and most people don't deserve it when bad things do happen."

Minato smells salt in the air and feels Naruto begin to shake next to him. Carefully, he puts an arm around the other boy's shoulder and supports him as best he can.

"Now let's see." Minato murmured gently. "When I saw you at the park, I noticed how lonely you seemed. It reminded me of being all alone. But playing with you helped me forget how lonely I've been, Naruto."

'And seeing you helped me remember what your mother looked like. It's harder to remember and after so many years in darkness...it's difficult to recall the detail of colors. But when I saw you smile, I saw her again.'

"You were alone?" Naruto sniffed, rubbing his eyes furiously on his sleeve. "Like me?"

"I was alone in darkness for a long time with only one other individual," Minato admitted with a wry smile, feeling his furry friend's chakra warm him from the inside. "At first he hated me. But loneliness brought us together and we became friends."

The scent of salt dissipated slightly and Naruto's shuddering had diminished.

"What happened?"

"Well," Minato skirted the issue carefully, aware that he couldn't exactly reveal Kurama's continued presence. "I was

transported here by a jutsu and I was by myself on the streets until I found you, Naruto. If it wasn't for you, I might have gone hungry that night. So now, you're one of my precious people."

"I am?"

"Mhm." He hugged the other boy gently. "I'm going to protect you and our friends, Naruto-kun. Besides, someone has to be there to watch you take Sandaime-sama's hat, right?"

"R-right." Naruto returned the embrace with none of Minato's restraint and felt his ribs creak in protest. "You're one of my precious people too, Minato-chan."

"What else was keeping you up?" Minato felt confident enough to dig a little deeper as they pulled away and looked at one another.

"It probably will sound silly..." Minato rather doubted that, but shrugged carelessly just the same. "..but I guess I'm worried that someday and I'm going to wake up and I'll be back in my apartment."

"Do you not like living here?" Minato asked patiently.

"No! I mean yes!" Naruto raised his voice and Minato pressed a finger to his lips and Naruto recoiled with a sheepish grin. "I love it here... I just don't really understand why."

"Do you think Mikoto-sama is tricking you?" Minato reasoned, pleased to see Naruto's brow furrow in thought.

"No." Naruto returned after a moment.

"Fugaku-sama?"

"He's warming up to me." While Minato privately agreed with that assertion, the Senju could tell right away that Naruto felt much less confident about Fugaku. "I guess he's not all bad."

"Sasuke and Itachi?" Minato prodded. "Have they hinted that they don't want you around?"

"Itachi's been great even if he is a little too quiet and weird." Naruto grumbled quietly. "Sasuke isn't so bad..when he isn't being a teme!"

Of course, why settle for a little maturity?

"And Hinata?"

"She's great!" The enthusiasm practically radiates from Naruto, the moonlight bathing the blonde's face in a subtle glow. "Her family is...kinda weird, but she's great. I'm really glad I met her. And you guys."

"Don't be scared." He nudged the blonde gently. "I can't imagine how afraid you must be of everything disappearing. You must look at everything that's happening around you and secretly be waiting for everything to fall apart around you. I don't think the entirety of the village is going to suddenly behave perfect, but you don't need all of them. You have people that care about you now and we're not going anywhere. I know that it's a leap of faith, but I think the reward is well worth the risk. What do you think, Naruto?"

It was a little underhanded to play on his friend's emotions, but Minato did not have it in him to feel guilty when the his actions had beneficial potential rather than a harmful outcome. Naruto *did* appear to be improving; his rigid features had softened and an almost gentle smile graced the blonde's face.

"I'm glad I met you, Minato." There was a peaceful quality to the blonde that Minato rarely associated with Uzumaki Clan members, but even Naruto's chakra felt relaxed.

"Not as much as I am you, Naruto."

Before another word was spoken, Minato felt something brush against his senses. A sense of pins prickling raced over his skin and the Senju staggered off the bed, ignoring the sudden assaulting chill as his feet made contact with the chilled floor boards. It was like a tingle at the periphery--an invasive wrongness--that Minato pressed against helplessly.

"Minato?" Naruto's voice sounded like it was coming from off in the distance--far down a tunnel.

The moonlight was dim, but the room seemed to have become slightly more shadowed and...shadows! Racing toward the window blinds, Minato threw them open, catching sight of a solid white ANBU mask devoid of any decoration.

The observer leapt backward, while Naruto made a startled sound behind him. All of the sudden, the Senju was yanked backward by a powerful hand fisted in his sleeping clothes and all but tossed like

a ragdoll backward. It was jarring since Minato had never really been manhandled by anyone outside of Jiraiya-sensei in a taijutsu spar, so the feeling of helplessness actually awakened long dormant panic that bubbled in his far too small body.

Still midair, Minato sucked in a breath as a flash of greenish chakra exploded upon the window sill and a malformed head of hair gave away his defender's identity.

"I've got him." The assurance was calm, but firm and suddenly Minato found himself snatched from the air and pressed into Itachi's chest. "Go."

Uchiha Shisui turned for a moment with a tanto in hand, moonlight delineating the contours of the enraged boy's face. The chunin looked every inch a predator as his body tensed and green chakra flared around him like a cloak. For an instant, the oddly patterned Sharingan rested on him before the other boy took off in pursuit of the fleeing shinobi.

"Wh-what just happened?" Naruto sputtered, looking rather terrified even if he was attempting to hide it.

The sound of skidding feet outside the room alerted them to incoming as Mikoto skidded to a halt brandishing a kunai with a wild look on her face. Fugaku appeared next to her looking like a grim spectre with his Sharingan active and roaming from Naruto clutching the blankets, to the open window, and Minato cradled in his eldest arms. The Senju can practically see the gears turning in Fugaku's mind before the man is across the room scooping up Naruto before Mikoto has a chance to react.

Naruto makes a startled sound, but wraps himself like a an octopus around Fugaku's arms and clings while the man strides to the window and stares out coldly.

"Itachi...was it?"

"No, tou-san." Itachi responded instantly.

Mikoto joined her husband and Minato unwittingly felt the corners of his mouth tug upward when the kunoichi rubbed Naruto's back for a moment. To his surprise, the woman crossed the room reached for him. Minato was not alarmed, but a moue of surprise escaped his lips when a pale hand reached out and caressed his cheek gently--perhaps even fondly--tracing the scarlet marking with a nail.

"I'll work out something with the Clan and discuss this with the Sandaime tomorrow." Fugaku growled, smacking the shutters closed with a violent thrust. "Tonight the sleeping arrangements will have to change."

"Understood, tou-san." Itachi inclined his head slightly and Minato tucked his face carefully against the older boy's chest, feeling rather surprised by how rapidly the heart was racing; an anxious pitter patter that seemed a stark contrast to the calm front his friend presented to the world.

"Naruto-kun, you will sleep with us." Fugaku spoke, moving to leave the room while Mikoto looked up with a bit of cautious happiness overtaking the concern.

"Um..okay." Naruto returned uncertainly, but to Minato it appeared that the boy may have clung a little tighter to his adoptive father.

Minato swallowed a lump in his throat and felt his eyes burn and deliberately turned his face into Itachi's neck. It was a silly thing to feel jealous. Minato was happy for Naruto. He was! It just still stung fiercely like an ache that never seemed to go away.

Let go. I need to let go.

A soothing hand lifted and began to rub soothing circles on his back. Minato shuddered as the patch of skin he was clinging to moistened.

"Is he alright?" He heard Mikoto ask in a hushed whisper.

Itachi's voice reverberated lightly. "I'll take him to my room. Shisui will sleep on the floor when he gets back."

He just wanted out of there and away. Thankfully fate granted his wish and he was carried out of the room and down the hall.

"I have you." Itachi murmured softly as they walked down the dark hallway.

The genin shifted his weight carefully and opened the door to his room before carrying him to a larger bed that Sasuke was half-awake on the far side of the bed, blinking with a look of confusion marring his sleepy expression. Itachi set him down with the care one

might take if they believed something to be fragile. Sasuke rolled his direction and pressed himself up on one elbow.

"Minato?" Sasuke yawned, tiredly before he seemed to notice the puffy redness around Minato's face. "What's wrong? Nii-san, did something happen to Minato?"

"Nothing to worry about, but Minato is going to rest with us tonight." Itachi remarked, smoothly dousing the light and sliding into bed. A tanto may or may not have been moved to the side of the bed for ease of access, but Minato did not comment and only moved forward dully until he was more or less centred in the bed.

"Were you crying?" A fumbling hand of equal size to his own reached out to touch his face, faltering on the damp patches. "What's wrong?"

"I'm being silly." Minato mumbled into the dark, staring into the black emptiness that reminded him far too much of darker days in that void. Unbidden, the Senju felt shivers race down his spine.

"Me too sometimes," Sasuke replied quietly, his small arms reaching over until he had thrown an arm over Minato's shoulders in what was surely intended to seem comforting. It felt more awkward than anything, but the adult in the four year old felt less alone and less trapped despite the trap of limbs. "G'night, Minato. Nii-san."

"Goodnight otouto." Itachi's calm was infectious and he felt another heavier arm settle over the top himself and Sasuke. "Goodnight, Minato."

The extra weight was not a exceptionally heavy or muscular the way an adult's body might be, but it felt almost foreign to his small body. All the same, it was warm and it served a reminder that he was not alone.

'It's just like you to forget my presence, Yondaime.'

Minato sighed in relief, feeling the return of drowsiness ease him back into sleep. 'You're part of me Kurama. I can't fathom an existence separate from you anymore.'

'You've got a way with words, gaki. We have a lot to discuss tomorrow.'

Minato tried to nod, but he was whisked away into rest again.

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"I don't see why we all have to wear black and white yukatas!" Naruto griped, throwing his arms up in the air and dramatically grinding his sandal into the rug. "We look like penguins!"

Minato, for once, was not supportive of his friend's tirade even if the identical black and white attire *did* have a boring look for lack of creativity. But to be honest, Minato was too busy standing still while the Uchiha matriarch fussed over his hair. There was something remarkable about the feeling of boar bristles gliding over his head; the effect made him want to arch into the tough like a feline and savor each moment.

"You don't even know what a penguin looks like." Minato hummed in agreement at Sasuke's rather skeptical tone. "You've never seen one!"

"Neither have you!" Naruto shot back. Far. Too. Loudly. Where was Fugaku to scold someone when you needed him?

"Traditional clan robes are practical for this sort of situation, Naruto-chan." Mikoto explained patiently, the comb continuing to transform Minato into a happy pile of mush.

"But just look at us!" Naruto shrieked far too close and Minato's eyes formed into scarlet slits as he stared down the blonde perpetrator that was gesturing at everyone. The Senju was sorely tempted to knock the blonde flying. "Seriously, all we need are a couple of beaks and we'd be set! We might as well pack up and move to snow country! Sasuke even has hair that looks like a duck butt!"

"Naruto, I'm going to kill you!"

The Senju treasonously hummed in pleasure when Sasuke made a wide motion as if to tackle the blonde to the ground. The brush tugged through his hair again before pausing on a knot and carefully working through the tangle before returning to blissful stroking.

"It would certainly explain our clan's propensity for nonsensical responses." Itachi piped in quietly just before Sasuke knocked Naruto sprawling.

"Nii-san, did you just make a joke?" Sasuke appeared torn
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between continuing the assault and utter shock.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Itachi denied smoothly.

"How come Minato gets to wear a different color?" Naruto attempted to sow a little more discord by pointing to the white and red yukata with a pattern of leaves on it that Minato had picked out--under heavy Mikoto duress--from the tailor. "His is less boring."

Good grief, that boy was demonstrating incredible persistance. Though, the Senju supposed, his mother had been just as tenacious and probably had been just as...trying at this age. Though, privately Minato may agree that while formal and appropriate, the Uchiha's selection *was* a bit less interesting than his own outfit.

"Because for some reason we were dumb enough to adopt you and not Minato!" Sasuke shouted back, shooting Minato a look that spoke volumes.

"Why you!" Naruto was on his feet, fist poised in the air.

"Are we ready?" Fugaku's voice broke the stillness, the man looking much calmer than he had at breakfast. No doubt a meeting with Hiruzen about last night had been beneficial. Minato could only hope that continued to be the case. Though the patriarch was shooting a dubious, unimpressed look at the pair that were just shy of brawling in the living room.

"We are." Mikoto stepped back and dropped the brush, much to Minato's regret.

"Thank you Mikoto-san." After a week of badgering, Minato finally followed the woman's direction to ease up on formality.

"Your welcome, Minato-kun." Mikoto responded warmly. "It's nice to have someone besides me that enjoys having long hair, though Itachi looks to be growing his out too!"

"I expect you all to represent our Clan with pride." Fugaku was obviously aiming most of his considerable attention on the two boys that were quelling beneath his unimpressed stare. "That goes for you too, Minato. You are a guest in our home so I expect *you* to behave accordingly."

"I made it!" Shisui slid into the room, waving at everyone

with anti-Uchiha cheer. "Who missed me?"

"Why would we?" Fear of Fugaku long forgotten, Naruto folded his arms and shot a finger at the chunin.

"Hn." Sasuke's contribution.

"We're glad you're here." Minato took pity on the chunin, knowing that the other boy really did care. He moved up and settled himself so that he was right next to the older boy. "Are we going to use *that* jutsu?"

"You bet!" Shisui winked at the rest and scooped him up quick enough that he buried his fingers in Shisui's penguin colored yukata. "Catch us if you can."

In perhaps a dozen impressively executed bursts of precise speed, Minato reappeared with laughter bubbling from his throat and Shisui looking more than a little smug.

"That was pretty cool!" Minato complimented the boy who puffed up like peacock.

"I'm nearly as fast as the Yondaime Hokage." The boy grinned with evident pride at his achievement. And it really was...Minato had never seen someone master the shunshin to that degree. Obviously the Hiraishin would trump such a skill, but outside of that, this kid could level the playing field against almost any opponent.

"Keep working hard than, Shisui-nii!" Minato's scarlet eyes settled on the other chunin, knowing that the future of the boy that he had grown to care about was not guaranteed. Not yet. "There is always something new to learn, right?"

"You got it, silver gaki. Now let's go get some chow before the rest of them arrive."

The Akimichi Clan grounds were just ahead. The compound was settled in close proximity to the Nara's forest and rather close to the southern outskirts of Konoha. There was a pair of Clan guards at the pair of well-kept wooden gates that greeted them cheerfully and waved them in. The homes themselves were modest if a bit on the larger side with spacious doorframes and wide porches no doubt intended to comfortably accommodate the girl of the clan members. The streets leading down to an area crowded with clan signatures was

not paved and no obvious signs of opulence were displayed like there were in the Uchiha district. Still, every porch was swept and everything looked well maintained.

At the end of the area, Minato's eyes widened in shock at the sheer amount of picnic tables and the immense line of outdoor barbeques that must have been brought in from every home in the clan. There was a firepit where a pair of beefy Akimichi kunoichi were slow roasting an entire boar while some of the Nara women were preparing greens alongside women from every clan in Konoha! Even a few Hyuuga women--some branded and some not--were kneading balls of dough with their hands.

"This looks amazing!" Naruto's voice was unmistakeable as footsteps raced up behind him.

"Fugaku!" Mikoto snapped, pulling a meat cleaver out of nowhere and twirling it."Behave." The man looked rather offended, but certainly was wise enough not to say so. "Shisui, go get those fish I bought. We're going to help out! Oh and tell Uchiha Asani to bring some of her leftover preserves. And if she claims she doesn't have any, tell her I'm not having her over for tea next week!"

"On it!" Shisui vanished in a burst of green chakra.

"And you three!" Minato and his friends flinch back as the cleaver extends challengingly in their direction. "No pranks...but go have fun!"

"Ok, kaa-san." At least Sasuke felt safe enough to reply, Minato just did not have it in him. Probably had something to do with a sensei that was constantly getting ripped apart by kunoichi and civilian women alike.

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Hiruzen had escaped the growing pile of paperwork on his desk, but had not escaped the shackles of his robes. Even so, the Sandaime was determined to not allow the entire evening to be about business.

Following the scent of mouth-watering food, Hiruzen made his way to the barbeques where he was greeted heartily by a smiling Chouza behind a massive grill of meats.
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"Hokage-sama!" The Akimichi saluted casually with a meat poker before wiping his fingers on a massive apron. "Let me get you a plate started! What'll it be?"

"Would I be right in thinking the sky is the limit, Chouza-san?"

"Hahaha!" Chouza chuckled. "We certainly do have a fine selection of almost everything."

"Lamb?" Hiruzen dared to hope. Far too often his secretaries provided the most convenient take out options or worse, the most healthy.

"Coming right up!" A truly impressive pair of lamb chops was dropped onto a dinner plate that would look like a serving platter to any other family. For an Akimichi appetite it was rather average.

Accepting the plate, the Kage leaned over and took a long whiff of the seasoned meat with an approving smile. "This smells excellent, Chouza. I better go get some sides from that lovely group of ladies though. I'm rather famished."

"We can't have that!" The Akimichi laughed boisterously, flipping a few steaks and hollering for more seasoning salt.

"Hiruzen." An aging voice called and the Sandaime cursed his own hearing.

"Koharu." He greeted his former teammate, noting that she had dressed up in a rather elaborate coral kimono and was daintily accepting a plate of steaming pork from one grill down. "You look lovely."

"Flattery doesn't work at my age, Hiruzen." The old shrew remarked with a dismissive sniff as she walked up and casually linked arms with him. "We need to talk."

"Can it wait?" Hiruzen asked without a trace of his anger showing. Anyone looking at them would see the Hokage accompanying any old friend--how far from the truth. They had been friends once, but at best they were colleagues now. At worst...Hiruzen knew she was far closer to Danzo.

"I've been patient long enough. Get your dinner and we will sit together." Koharu swept past him with the grace of a woman

twenty years her junior and a deadliness that surpassed many of the present generation.

Perhaps he really ought to put Koharu in charge of the Academy. Standards had certainly slipped and the Iron Lady that Tobirama-sensei had helped fashion into a powerful kunoichi would certainly bust some heads. It was a pity that he could not trust her because he absolutely knew she would be brilliant in that role.

Back to business, Hiruzen smiled brightly at the working women, pleased to see every Clan represented behind the tables.

"I don't think I've eaten so well in a long time." Plates of sushi and onigiri, meat buns and spring rolls. Soups, sauces, and salads. Movement from the side and the Hokage spotted a flash of blonde and brown hair vanishing over the wall leaving behind a much leaner dessert table.

Ah, the very young.

"Hokage-sama." Hiruzen stood up a little straighter as Shikaku's wife Yoshino appeared, wiping her knife on her apron. "May I be of assistance?"

Almost ready to say no, Hiruzen felt a smidge of evil fill him and he smiled benevolently.

"You ladies have worked far too hard tonight." Hiruzen coughed slightly when a single Aburame male straightened and stared him down blankly. "And gentleman, sorry Ishiko-san." The trenchcoated chunin shrugged and returned to tossing his salad. "I'm very happy to serve myself and allow you ladies to get some delicious food for yourselves. But if you see Shikaku later, can you remind him that his paperwork was due yesterday? I was looking for his report this morning and he must have forgotten."

Yoshino's eyes lit up like they were on fire and there was a slight sound of teeth grinding before the dark haired woman yanked her apron off and smiled sickeningly sweetly. "Not to worry, Hokage-sama. I'll make sure that doesn't happen again. I understand how important it is to have everything on time."

"Thank you, Yoshino-san." Hiruzen smirked as the woman stalked off to perform an early execution. Sometimes his job had perks.

"Hiruzen, have you seen Naruto-kun?" The Kage flashed a smile at Mikoto who was balancing a pair of plates and looking around surreptiously.

"It's hard to say." He smiled genially. "But I thought I saw young Chouji and Naruto-kun visiting the dessert area earlier."

A dark look spread over Mikoto's face and the Hokage knew his work was done.

"Thank you."

"Your welcome." *The pleasure is all mine.*

Hiruzen set to dusting a nice salad with chunks of crab meat and taking a spoonful of melon balls. The Kage had to admire the sizeable spread the Akimichi's had provided. Even more, the man was impressed by the teamwork that was happening behind the scenes. A Hyuuga branch member was laughing with a member of the Inuzuka *and* Uchiha clan members. The Aburame and a tiny redheaded Yamanaka were discussing something together. And an Akimichi woman was tutoring a main branch Hyuuga on meat temperatures. It was...a little shocking and it made Hiruzen determined to dip into the village coffers to quietly sponsor additional clan events to promote more of this behavior.

Even glancing across the tables--deliberately ignoring a glaring Koharu--there was progress being made. Fugaku was in a deep discussion with Shibi and Inoichi while taking appreciative bites of his meal. Talk about unlikely dinner companions: how wonderful. Stuck up Hiashi in his standout white kimono looked like he was about to have a heart attack while Tsume grilled while Hyuuga Hizashi looked to be having drinks with an Uchiha! A chunin nearing promotion too! Either way, this evening had hardly begun and it was already a success in his eyes.

Mood too good to be ruined by Koharu, Hiruzen finally wandered over to his waiting teammate who was giving him a narrow look from over her half-eaten plate of greens.

"The food smells excellent." Hiruzen took a bite, the meaty portion almost melting off the bone from being so tender. Lifting his hand into the air, he saluted Chouza who beamed at the silent praise. And took another heartier bite.

"Danzo is unhappy with some of the decisions you've been

making." Koharu saw fit to spoil his meal.

"Really?" Hiruzen remarked casually, dabbing his mouth with a napkin and taking a long swallow of water. He could see his old teammate's jaw clench just a little tighter with each passing second and enjoyed the moment.

"So am I." There was anger in those aged eyes and something akin to hurt. Hiruzen almost bought the pained expression on Koharu's face. Perhaps in his age he really was slipping.

"I would have imagined you of all people would have appreciated the significance of strengthening our ties with the Uchiha Clan." Hiruzen was pleased to see that his barb had struck true, sometimes old pains were necessary reminders if change were to occur.

"It is not necessary to bring that up, Hiruzen." Koharu's reprimand was bitter and laced with a pain that had not aged so well.

"Are you so fickle that your feelings for Kagami have withered away like your good sense?" Hiruzen asked, taking another bite of steak.

"Kagami is not the issue." Koharu sniped back, a glimpse of the deadly force she used to be still there underneath the wrinkles and heavy robes to keep the chill away from thin bones. "And neither is my sense. This is your petty method of getting back at Danzo-"

"For what?" Hiruzen laughed, waving at one of his saluting shinobi with outward content. Seeing that he had successfully silenced his old comrade he took a bite of crab meat and closed his eyes to savor the taste. "Tell me, what sleights? Danzo, whether he understands this or not, has a necessary function in Konoha. Missions that I dare not accept for political reasons can be performed off the books by his faction. I ask you again, what do I have to get back at him for?"

"Danzo says you're not as sharp as you used to be." Koharu took up a mug of tea and stared at the brim without comment for a second. "I think you're just as sharp as ever, Hiruzen. But you and I both know you were ready for retirement when Namikaze took the hat." Hiruzen did not confirm or deny it the truth of that matter. "And I fear your sentimentality has made you lose all sense."

"And I think you've forgotten our sensei's will, Koharu."

Koharu recoiled as if struck.

"Protect those who love the village and those who believe in you. And nurture those to whom you can entrust the next generation." Hiruzen recited the words from memory, recalling his devastation and shock when the man he respected most of all went to his death. "All of our generation love this village, Koharu. But the care of the next generation is something that Danzo has forgotten...and so you have lost sight of it in his darkness."

Koharu set her cup down, tugging on her sleeve where Hiruzen knew she kept a kunai. It was the comfort of a shinobi to touch their tools of trade and draw strength from them, so the Kage was hardly concerned by the gesture. Nor was he moved by the stark paleness of her cheeks.

"Senju Minato is an unexpected legacy." Hiruzen spoke, remembering the proud man in blue armor with a happuri faceguard. "I do not ask you to always agree with me, but I ask you to abide by my decisions."

"You might be right, Hiruzen." Koharu pushed her plate back. "The consequences of being wrong are astronomical."

"All the same, it was sensei who chose the next Hokage." Hiruzen took another bite of his meal nonchalantly, not missing the flinch on his old friend's face. "If you were half as clever as you imagine yourself to be, you would know why Danzo was not chosen. Therefore my edict stands: Senju Minato will go into Tsunade's care."

"Tsunade." The name was spat like it was a vile substance. "That disgrace is hardly deserving of such an honor after she turned her back on this village."

"Careful Koharu." Hiruzen's tone suddenly glacial. "There are limits to my tolerance. Even Danzo appreciates the significance of having an asset like Tsunade back in the village."

"I know you think that I'm Danzo's lapdog." Koharu stood up, focused on something--or rather someone--in the distance. "But my interests and advice have always come from a desire to protect this village. If you're right about this...prove Danzo wrong."

"I will." Hiruzen promised, for once, fully intending to keep that oath.

"Good." Koharu moved to step away, leaning down so that her mouth was inches from his ear and her fingers pinched his robe. "But if you're wrong and something happens to that child, it won't be Danzo that comes for you, Hokage-sama."

"I would expect no less." Hiruzen puzzled the matter over before tossing a lure into the deep. "Koharu, if you still have something to offer, perhaps Minato could use some instruction."

Koharu paused midstep before her sandaled foot met again with the earthy ground. "Goodnight, Hokage-sama."

The wonders of the great game truly were astounding.

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"How did you do that?" Shikamaru studied the board that had defeated him in disbelief. Tapping his jawline with a finger, he studied the perfect hierarchy of moves that had crept into what he had believed to be a solid defense. It. Just. Did. Not. Make. Sense.

"Don't you normally lose to your dad?" Chouji asked, extending his bad to offer Shikamaru one of his chips that the Nara heir accepted with a resigned sigh. Unfortunately, the crunch of the salty morsel did not ease up his inherent frustration.

"Yeah, but my dad is supposed to beat me." And whining about losing was pathetic, pointless, and a waste of time. Somehow, he was managing all three today.

"Minato-chan is pretty awesome though." Chouji remarked while stuffing another wad of chips into his mouth. "Maybe he's just super smart like you, Shikamaru."

Several things were out of place here. For as long as their parents had been friends which was before conception, opportunities to play with Ino and Chouji came several times a week. Sure they were pretty young, but Chouji had never spoken so familiar in regards to Ino. Chouji was naturally shy, which had been just fine with Shikamaru since they avoided domineering Ino like the plague. But his larger pal was defending Minato and placing the other boy on the same level as Shikamaru. Not that he was jealous, but what had changed?
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"-chan?" Shikamaru queried, fishing for information.

Chouji just shrugged his shoulders. "It's what Naruto calls him."

That was hardly informative. The familiarity had to have come from something else...something like-

"He showed you how to use your chakra to walk on walls too." Shikamaru realized with a start.

"Well, he thought that Naruto and I would have a better chance of getting our snacks that way." Chouji responded nonchalantly, kicking his beefy legs in the air and nearly toppling the shogi board when he stretched his arms. "Talk about super useful! I can't wait to show tou-san and kaa-san! They're gonna be so surprised when they see I can reach the top shelves of the pantry!"

"Might be smarter if you don't tell them." Shikamaru pointed out, turning to watch the rest of the kids crowded Sasuke's brother Itasi. Or was it Akachi? Whatever.

"Good point!" Shikamaru jerked backward as his friend practically vibrated off the seat with a fiery leer. "Midnight snacks, here I come!"

Not exactly what he was going for...troublesome.

Suddenly, a burst of flame hit the unlit campfire and cast a halo of warmth around the area. Drawn like a moth to the flame, Shikamaru started trudging toward the fire with Chouji automatically following suit. With a put-upon sigh, Shikamaru dropped down onto one of the many enormous logs that the Akimichi had strategically placed around the firepits that were all glowing cheerfully around the extensive picnic area of the compound. The warmth was pleasant; the log shifted as Chouji settled close to him again and Shikamaru stared into the shadows of the flame--almost tempted to see if he could work out the stages of the clan jutsu.

"Isn't burning food gonna ruin it?" The whiskered blonde asked with a puzzled frown of the girl with bluish hair that was prompting him to spear a marshmellow on a sharpened stick.

"If you stick it inside the fire...it will burn." The Hyuuga confirmed as she added no less than three of the white morsels to her own stick. Shikamaru lifted a brow; apparently someone had a sweet

tooth. "But if we are careful and only hold it close to the flame, it will become warm and sticky and will help melt the chocolate."

"Huh." It was clear to the Nara that the blonde was still clueless, but he supposed it would sound absurd to someone that had never had one before.

A blind man would have noticed that some of the shinobi among the clans reacted differently to Uzumaki Naruto. When they were called to come make plates, Shikamaru had instantly noticed the restless hesitance than greeted the blonde. The Clan heads, Shikamaru's mother included, had been kind and had not behaved like anything was unusual. Like sheep, most of the behavior eased or at least became less obvious, but even Shikamaru could see the looks and stares that looked almost resentful directed at the blonde.

Translating that behavior to the bubbly boy bouncing with a cremating marshmellow on his stick was...it just did not compute.

Redirecting his attention, Shikamaru passed over the Hyuuga male that looked to be engrossed in a quiet conversation with the Aburame kid in the sunglasses. Ino had moved so that she was standing next to Hinata and Naruto and actually appeared to be conversing with the pair without screaming. Across the flickering flames, the silver haired enigma was consuming his own s'more Shikamaru could see the Senju boy's chest shaking even if no sound was forthcoming as he stared at Uchiha Sasuke who appeared to have lost his second attempt at roasting to impatience.

Chouji had disappeared while Shikamaru was thinking, only to reappear armed with three sticks with easily half a dozen marshmellows on each. One was shoved into his hands and the Nara sighed and dragged himself to his feet.

"Are you going to honor the terms of our bet?"

Shikamaru nearly jumped out of his skin and he jerked back to glare at the troublesome boy whose eyes seemed to glow red in the flame.

"It's troublesome...but I suppose I'll have to." Shikamaru admitted grudgingly.

"You know, Shikamaru-san, there are plenty of practical applications for learning to walk on walls." The Senju boy spoke so soft that the Nara had to strain to listen and found himself curious as

the other boy's gaze settled on Naruto who was moaning appreciatively as he bit into his dessert. It seemed strange how content the other boy looked--almost proud. "Do you think you kaa-san would think to check the roof?"

That suggestion certainly had potential...huh. But how did?

"I saw your tou-san getting a talking to earlier." The Senju dropped the information casually and Shikamaru cursed his transparency.

"Ah." Shikamaru remarked, not knowing what else to say, but still wondering what the other boy got out of this. "I still don't see why you care whether or not I learn this skill."

"Someday it might matter." There was something almost broken in the Senju's eyes that Shikamaru felt rather shaken by the emptiness. Swallowing down his questions and fears, he watched the silver haired boy force a smile that seemed to have been eaten away by grief until barely a husk of joy remained. "It might seem meaningless to you, but if it might help you someday, I have to try."

The other boy had turned away, focusing again on where a chocolate smeared Naruto had lifted a blushing Hinata onto his back and was giving her a piggy back ride. In the blink of an eye, Uchiha Sasuke had reappeared at the Senju's elbow radiating concern and effectively pinning the Nara in place with the intensity of his glare. Holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender and shaking his head vigorously, the ebony haired boy glared him down again before stepping boldly into the Senju's space and lightly nudged the other boy out of his trance. The pale boy made a sound like a startled bird and blinked questioningly at his friend, before offering a slower smile that crinkled his cheeks--highlighting the scarlet facial markings.

"I'll learn the wall walking thing." The pair turned his direction and Shikamaru coughed and shuffled a step closer to the fire, leaning over to place his treats in a warm spot. "It's troublesome, but a deal is a deal, Minato-san."

"Thank you, Shikamaru."

"It might seem meaningless to you, but if it might help you someday, I have to try."

The words haunted Shikamaru like nothing ever had in his short life. There was something fearful and afraid in those words and

that left the Nara feeling disconcerted and motivated for reasons that he had no answers for.

Senju Minato was shaping up to be a the greatest puzzle of his life. Shikamaru may only be four--almost five--but he had his father's mind, even if he exercised it rarely. There was a mystery waiting to be solved and a sense that his time was limited.

Glancing over to Chouji, he sighed and wandered over to where his large friend was starting his second batch of s'mores.

"Chouji, I know it's troublesome...but I want you to show me how to walk up the wall."

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Minato felt him before he saw him. Still, his small body instantly tensed when he heard the light brush of footsteps, the sweep of material passing over grass, and the tell-tale tap of a cane passing over the ground.

'**Such darkness.**'

The shift in realm was coming easier and easier at this point and it hardly took more than a second for Minato to adjust to the mindscape. Within it, Kurama was standing in that field with his tails lashing out in opposing directions and the large maw opened exposing razor-sharp teeth.

'What do you feel?' Minato asked, taking a step back before monstrous chakra could swallow him.

'**This twisted intent feels like that treacherous student of yours.**' *Kurama chuckled dangerously, scarlet eyes seeking to pin him in place. It was a new accusation, but the Senju did not flinch when the massive bijuu lowered his head until they were snout to nose and he could feel the heat of the kyuubi's breath heating his skin.*

'Obito may not be beyond saving.' Minato remarked carefully, lifting a tiny hand to pat the quivering, ebony nose that felt like wet sandpaper.

'**Heh.**' *Kurama pulled back and settled into a mass of coiled limbs preparing to crouch.* '**While I believe that notion is a fool's hope, the larger issue is that man. What will you do?**'
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'Nothing.'

'**Nothing.**' *Kurama replied dangerously, eyes sharpening and his tails sweeping up cyclones in the air around them. The artificial sun seemed to dim in response to the bijuu's displeasure as the air buzzed with ill-will. Finally the massive fox seemed to calm somewhat, though a massive clawed hand lifted into the air and inspected him.* '**What is your plan?**'

'I'm not afraid. Danzo's subordinate was spying on me. I'm certain he intends to approach me himself. He won't make a move against us here. And my nii-san is here.'

'**You accept your role as that boy's brother but are still struggling to accept being only Naruto's friend.**' *Kurama commented idly, finally tossing the Senju up until he was balanced between the long ears right on the bijuu's head.*

It was a position that--by mutual agreement--was never discussed. Somehow the position made Kurama feel more comfortable when he was being pressured, but the large fox loathed any sign of weakness; therefore, mentioning it was something that was not done. From Minato's perspective, it was just a bit awesome to sit so high with his friend.

'Kakashi was always my little brother. From the moment he became my student, he was important to me. He was part of my life for longer than I was in a relationship with Kushina.' Minato explained. 'Being his brother, albeit the younger one, is not a stretch for me.'

'**Will Kakashi be able to stand up to Danzo?**'

Kurama sounded noticeably off leading Minato to suspect that the fox was genuinely worried. Perhaps for good reason since bijuu chakra can easily overwhelm the chakra system of a small child; no doubt his companion was worried they were potentially going into a dangerous situation. Best to reassure the bijuu before he riled up over nothing.

'Kakashi is going to be at his best when he has something to protect.' Minato scratched a giant ear with both hands vigorously, grinning when the fox's body shivered from his attention. 'Besides, Hiruzen is right here. It would be suicide for Danzo to make a move in a location that has both the Hokage and all of his best shinobi in once place. Don't worry.'

'**Hmph.**' *Kurama definitely was buying into that. After centuries of dealing with stupid crap, a little paranoia was rather expected.*

'So, how did your visit with the other bijuu go?'

'You seriously want to discuss this right now, gaki?' *Even though Kurama was unable to look at him from this angle, the intensity of his friend's scrutiny was obvious from the buzz of chakra around his body.*

'We have the time.' Minato rubbed the bridge of his nose to alleviate the itching from a bit of clinging fur that had migrated to his face. 'Besides, I'm tired. Being around my rowdy friends all day wears me out...I'm passing out as soon as I hit the bed.'

'You're unbelievable you know that.' *Kurama insulted him openly and Minato just shrugged.* **'I'm starting to see where Naruto gets it.'**

'Be nice now.' He flicked the oversized ear, watching it extend and shift. 'Now tell me what happened when those three! I'm dying to know!'

'Fine.' Kurama griped, laying his large body down--slowly so as not to dislodge Minato--and rested under a canopy of large trees. **'Your idiotic plan for Shukaku might have worked. When that damn tanuki finally spoke to me, the uppity bastard kept flinging insults and growling. When I finally got him to shut up after nearly of listening to that pest rant, I insulted him and suggested that his inferior bond with his jinchuuriki would never become as powerful as mine. We fought, I laid out some breadcrumbs, and he inevitably severed our connection. As far as I'm concerned, I've done my best and Shukaku is on his own.'**

'That poor kid.' Minato frowned, imagining the poor child putting up with what Kurama termed was his insane sibling.

'Poor me.' *Kurama growled.* **'I had to put up with that freak for nearly an entire day.'**

'Sorry.' Minato apologized.

'Heh. My efforts to contact Choumei were troubling.' *Admission of failure was not something his friend swallowed easily so that alerted Minato right away.* **'I succeeded, but I got the impression that the conditions the jinchuuriki are living in interfered with our connection somehow. Some crude fuinjutsu from an outside source, perhaps, but it was like yelling at someone from a very long distance. The message may have been distorted,**

misinterpreted, or not received at all. I believe Choumei could hear me, but as to the clarity I do not know.'

'A barrier perhaps.' Minato mused, face scrunching as he wracked his brain. 'Without more to go on, I would have difficulty saying with any certainty, but if Choumei is in Taki...that village is incredibly suspicious of outsiders and I doubt they think much of jinchuuriki. I hope they got the message.'

'Saiken got it.' *Kurama redirected with good news and Minato felt a surge of relief pass over him.*

'He did?'

'A crazy slug, but he listened and he is going to do his best to work with his host to be prepared.' *A rumble built in the massive creature beneath him and he could feel the hesitation in his best friend.* **'We talked for a while. About our father. Saiken reminded me of some moments I had forgotten and I shared a few things.'**

'You bonded.' Minato stroked the long ear again, feeling strangely pleased with the way the appendage quivered.

'Hardly. Putting up with you is difficult enough.'

'So sweet.' Minato grinned, feeling a tug from the outside. 'I think I had better get out there now.'

'Then go.'

Easy as that, the rest of the world reappeared and Minato heard the tapping sound once more before it stopped and a towering presence made itself known beside him. Fabricating inquisitive behavior was simple enough, so the Senju boy turned his head, angling his jaw so the fire bounced off the prominent facial markings, and held the gaze of the bandaged man that was looking him over with the reverence one might regard a priceless artifact.

Coming from Shimura Danzo, that look was creepier than hell.

"Want one?" Minato casually extended his marshmellow skewer to the observing elder. Off to the side, Itachi had moved to place himself within reaching distance without making the action look rushed.

"Senju Minato." The man paused as if tasting the name. "My name is Shimura Danzo and I am one of the Hokage's advisors."

The day Minato believed that was the day that Orochimaru became the next Hokage. Though it certainly would be a method of ingratiating himself with Minato--if only the Senju was actually naive and uninformed. It would be a cold day in hell before he made a deal with this particular devil.

"It's an honor, Danzo-sama." Minato used his Kage smile that was used to charm customers and psychopaths alike.

"Your name reminds me of a powerful shinobi that this village lost." Minato froze, not daring to respond and give himself away; Danzo continued to speak, almost more to himself than Minato and the gnarled fingers tapped the side of his walking stick over and over. "Your face reminds me of an even greater one. A greatness that I have no doubt that you will surpass given time and help."

Alright, so it was a recruitment speech. Nothing he had not anticipated and nothing he could not handle.

"I've been told I look much like the Nidaime Hokage, Danzo-sama. But Shisui-san mentioned that I look like my aniki too." The chakra signature hiding in the trees flickered slightly. "Hokage-sama said he would arrange for us to meet and I'm looking forward to it."

"Hatake Sakumo." Danzo murmured, something dark clinging to his voice that unsettled not only Minato but Kurama as well considering the sudden flash of anger from his companion. "What a perfect child you are."

Suddenly, a bandaged hand lifted and extended ominously in his direction. Three things happened at once; Minato's eyes dilated and he experienced a gut churning fear, Uchiha Itachi's chakra flared like a beacon to any shinobi nearby, and leaves whistled before an imposing figure in a jounin's vest and navy blue shirt and pants appeared. The familiar slant of a hitai-ate, a Hatake mask, and the tell-tale bedhead styled silver hair: Kakashi!

"Minato-kun certainly does resemble our father." The casual tone did little to conceal the killing intent bubbling beneath a transparent posture. "And while I'm pleased he was able to meet one of Konoha's esteemed elders, I'm afraid I'm going to have to borrow him for a few seconds. If you'll excuse us."

Before he could utter a protest or greeting, he found himself being herded away from the fire. And away from Danzo's grasp. Glancing over his shoulder, Minato saw Hiruzen had arrived--Itachi's chakra flare a success--and was exchanging words with an expressionless Danzo. Sasuke and Naruto had moved to pursue him, but had been held back by a worried looking Itachi.

The glow of the fire was dimmer from a distance, but Minato could still make out Hinata standing behind Naruto with her hands buried in the back of his dark yukata, while Itachi towered over the trio with a hand on Sasuke's shoulder.

"It's a really neat gathering tonight." Kakashi murmured quietly, masking his emotions even more deeply than he masked his face. The jounin dropped into a crouch while resting all of his weight on the balls of his feet and stared at him with his lone eye that was giving him a once over.

There were a thousand things he wanted to say, but Minato saw beyond the necessity of words. Kakashi flinched slightly when Minato stepped into his space, but the man did not run away as the Senju was certain he wanted to do. Instead, he remained still as a statue while the small boy slid his arms around Kakashi's neck and tucked his face into the masked neck that smelled of blood, sweat, and tea leaves.

"Hello, nii-san." Minato whispered, his mind flashing through memory after memory; an image of a devastated boy hovered over a cooling, bloody corpse, to the quirky team photo they took with Rin and Obito, to long dinners Kushina painstakingly prepared for the three of them in the months prior to the sealing. To Obito's presumed death. Rin's suicide via chidori. Kakashi had suffered far too much in his lifetime...Minato could only hope the boy--rather this man he helped raise--could make new, better memories now.

Finally a pair of trembling arms wound around him and lifted him off the ground. Minato was relaxed and unafraid of the sudden movements because above everyone else, Kakashi was a person that he believed in completely. So he just fisted his hands in the stiff, jounin flak jacket and stayed quiet.

"I suppose I am." The response was quiet, but the arms around him had tightened slightly.

"Did you just get here?" Minato asked with a slightly

muffled voice since his mouth was near Kakashi's neck.

"Hmm, yep." The reply sounded a little more grounded this time.

"You're late." Minato admonished with a tiny laugh. "I've been waiting for you."

The arms tightened again before relaxing slightly. "I had to help an old lady take her groceries home before I came."

Obito really left a mark on you didn't he, Kakashi?

"Awful nice of you." Minato replied, pulling back to look at his masked brother who looked to be marvelling over him. Squirming slightly, he was pleased when the taller man obligingly put him down, but before the man could even consider escaping, he lashed out and snagged one of Kakashi's hands and gave it a firm tug. "Come on, Kakashi-nii. Come meet my friends."

"I...really..don't-"

Minato understood Kakashi's reservations on a certain level, but he also recognized the jounin really needed to move past his fears and regrets in order to heal.

"You're not a Senju are you?" Minato asked his brother while walking him closer to the campfire area. "Our hair is the same color and you look like the picture we saw of Nidaime-sama...without the mask."

"Not that I know of." Kakashi answered with a resigned hang of his head. "But my--our father had silver hair too. It was a trademark of the Hatake Clan."

"Guess silver hair was just destiny then." Minato remarked, waving at his friends with his free hand as he pulled up the reluctant Kakashi to the expectant group of observers. Minato tugged on his brother's arm, watching the lone eye jerk from where it had been focused on Naruto's glowing face. "Kakashi-nii, these are my friends. Hyuuga Hinata." The heiress fell into a perfect, formal bob. "Uchiha Sasuke." The small boy eyed Kakashi suspiciously but grunted--probably because of the look Itachi was giving him. "Sasuke's aniki, Itachi-san." The older boy nodded slightly. "And Uzumaki Naruto."

"Ha!" Naruto darted forward and planted himself in front of

the stiff jounin. "You look really suspicious with that mask on dattebayo!" The innocent patch of flowers next to Naruto's foot had no chance as the blonde viciously--albeit accidently--squashed it beneath his hopping feet. "Are you really Minato-chan's brother?"

"Naruto-kun, this *is* Hatake Kakashi." Itachi remarked with a put-upon sigh.

"We look alike." Minato grinned up at the masked individual who eye-smiled in return before mechanically crouching down next to him.

"You can't know that unless he takes his mask off." Sasuke muttered.

"I suppose your friends are a package deal, pup?" The jounin looked in his direction and Minato felt his lips curve into a smile and he nodded. "Right then, it's nice to meet you all."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting. Real life happens. Anyway, I'm a bit nervous about this chapter, but I would love to hear from you all! So please review :)

Chapter 7: A measure of worth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Koharu struck the training post and grit her teeth when she felt the tender skin around her knuckles split open. Again. Days of abuse had left her hands black, blue, and swollen. Now she could add bloody to the list of reasons.

Groaning to herself, Koharu wondered if Mito-sama would take pity on her and heal her hands with jutsu.

Across the field, she could see Homura, Hiruzen, and Danzo engaged in a three-way spar. Clouds of dust kicked up every now and then along with the occasional pop from Kawarimi.

Bitterness filled every inch of her. They were supposed to be a team. They were supposed to include her when they practiced: they never did. Koharu found it difficult to contain the resentment she felt when the excluded her.

Launching herself into the air, Koharu tried to forget. Each twist evaded an illusionary target. Each punch was intended for her sexist teammates. Each time she threw a senbon, the chakra infused projectiles disappeared into the target's entirely.

A fist smashed the air hatefully: she did not have the raw strength that her teammates had. Koharu flashed through a series of hand signs: she did not have chakra reserves that rivalled her comrades. She was not a man; she was just as good as they were.

A ball of fire raced from her mouth to engulf a glade of trees. Burning leaves fell to the ground only to fade away in curled, darkened wisps. She stared in bitter satisfaction as red embers floated through the air carrying the scent of scorched bark. The fireball itself had been of acceptable size and certainly nothing to scoff at, but it was nothing compared to her genjutsu.

Few had the knack for genjutsu that Koharu possessed. Hiruzen liked to joke that Koharu was so good because she had such an active imagination, but her chakra control and precision helped a lot in those areas. Coupled with her exceptional ability with senbon, Koharu's kill count exceeded the majority of her friends.

Still, no one ever asked her to spar. Not ever. It was a rather bitter pill to swallow.

"When my brother, Hashirama, spoke of the will of fire, I highly doubt this is what he had in mind." The unmistakeable, flat tone of her sensei distilled her thoughts and left Koharu open-mouthed and horrified.

"Sensei!" She squeaked like a frightened little mouse, her posture altering so that she was staring at her soot covered toes peeking out of her scuffed, abused sandals. "My emotions got the best of me! I'm so sorry!"

"Emotions are not without value, Koharu."

The statement shocked her so, that she straightened just as a geyser of water exploded from her Sensei's poised hands to smother the last of the flames before they could spread elsewhere. She had seen it dozens of times, but it was still a feat of magic to see water form from the air itself at the Senju's command.

"I thought you said emotions would get us killed." Koharu stated, looking up at the frowning man.

"I said emotions had no place on the battlefield." Tobirama looked down at her thoughtfully and Koharu felt it was the first time the man had truly paused to inspect her to carefully. Under that hard gaze, Koharu straightened up. "Because they hinder one's abilities to make logical, detached decisions. In battle, emotional outbursts will get yourself and your allies killed, which is why I said what I did. But emotions themselves are relevant to who you are. It's simply a balance in understanding when it's appropriate to allow yourself to feel."

Koharu's head hung in shame and her entire body quivered.

"May I safely assume the cause of your disruption is envy?" The Nidaime prompted with narrow precision.

"It's not--" She protested, pausing only when she realized she really was. "I just want them to value me. They never seem to consider what I have to offer."

"The flaw in this situation is that you allow your jealousy to control your emotional state instead of channeling those feelings to your advantage."

"What advantage?" Koharu knew she sounded churlish, but she was just so far beyond exasperation at this point that she was having

difficulty with basic comprehension.

Instead of senseless riddles, Senju Tobirama cut to the heart of the matter and pinned her with a harsh stare. "Prove them wrong. Cultivate your own strengths until no one can match you in your chosen field. There is value in increasing your taijutsu, but you and I but know you are built for speed and not a battle of strength. Do not fight your abilities, but rather build upon your foundation until you surpass others in what you can accomplish. In this way, you will prove yourself just as strong as those you strive to surpass. Believe in yourself and uphold your comrades...they will come to believe in you as well, Koharu."

"Do you really believe that, sensei?"

"Have you ever known me to cater to your emotions?" The Nidaime rebuked her with a peculiar sort of gentleness.

"Never."

"Then you have your answer. Hone your skills and bow to no one."

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"Hiruzen isn't budging on the Uchiha having guardianship of our young Senju?" Homura asked, with the expected dose of troubled concern clinging to his words.

Koharu almost snorted aloud. Did Homura really think that anyone fell for his act? Surely this little performance was not for her benefit? Except...Danzo was sitting opposite the pair of them sipping a steaming mug of tea. And unless Homura was simply observing niceties--something the man had *never* excelled at--then he was asking for Koharu's benefit.

"I fear Hiruzen's decisions show a steady decline in sound reasoning." Danzo murmured and Koharu's fingers curled around her mug reflexively. The weight of Danzo's disapproval was heavy and apparent to them both, but it had never occurred to her just how open the man's disdain was until that moment."Ever since the death of the Yondaime Hokage, Hiruzen has favored emotional propositions over rational actions. The consequences of his prolonged indifference may cost the village dearly if our enemies sense weakness."

When Koharu had mentioned that Hiruzen thought she was 'Danzo's lapdog' earlier that evening, she had not believed it to be a
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reality for even a moment. But here she was listening to Danzo whisper words of displeasure into their ears and...they were lapping it up. Well, Homura was, but Koharu was wise enough to know that she would have been doing the same thing if she had not been given such a wake-up call.

"Hiruzen isn't weak, Danzo. Hiruzen still has the strength to back up his position." Homura countered, but there was no real commitment--no backbone in the words. It was like the simpering of lords debating petty little things they did not really believe in to begin with.

"Yet every decision he makes weakens the village further." Danzo rebuked the weak protest with an aggravated wave of his hand.

Koharu scoffed aloud, drawing the full weight of their attention to where she is seated with two cushions supporting her aching spine. Recognizing the necessity for caution, the old kunoichi smiled and twisted her words with care to provide the desired effect.

"Oh, I don't know." She motioned sharply to the side and a Root member approached with a bow and an offer of tea that she accepted without giving the man so much as a second glance. What to do? Perhaps lure the conversation in another direction. "I think that anything Hiruzen does can be twisted to our benefit. Perhaps this alliance between the Uchiha and Aburame Clans may allow us to infiltrate them for information. There is always *something* to be gained."

"The idea had occurred to me as well." Danzo admitted with a subtle, affable acknowledgement that let Koharu know that she was in the clear for now.

Danzo believed he had her. He actually believed she was nothing more than one of his cronies and a tool that had use. It sickened her and made her feel just as feeble and helpless as those days when she was nought but a small girl.

"We have a bigger problem to deal with anyway." Koharu dropped the breadcrumb: knowledge is power after all and, for once, Koharu was confident that an earlier discovery would successfully divert the conversation in a safer direction.

"What is it?" Homura sounded genuinely interested, while Danzo seemed almost dismissive--as if he did not consider her information worthy of concern.

Danzo thought she had nothing to offer except as a pawn. In her blindness, she had become such, but seeing the living scion of the Nidaime reminded Koharu that she was a kunoichi of Konoha. Her existence served the village and not...Danzo. She could admit that she had lost her way at some point, but she was not about to give up. Not this time.

To her left, a mirror reflected nothing but a hunched-backed woman with iron grey hair, skin with none of the smoothness of youth, and a robe far too clean for an active kunoichi to wear. The old hag in the mirror looked nothing like the girl that had taken part in the genocide of one of Kiri's oldest clans. There was no hint that the woman sitting there could ever have been a student of a Hokage. Nor a girl that had been hopelessly in love with a man that married for duty instead of his heart. Where was Utatane Koharu in this reflection? What would Tobirama-sensei say if he could see her now?

Something had to be done to lure Danzo's attention elsewhere for a time. The man was absolutely focused and more than a little dangerous.

"The Raikage and an entourage from Kumogakure are coming to Konoha in a month's time." The twin looks of shock and Danzo's twisted grimace of anger made it clear that Koharu had successfully managed to surprise the duo. "Peace talks. If it were any other village, I would suppose they would do a bit of reconnaissance, but Kumo has always been unnaturally bold."

"I've been anticipating a meeting like this." Danzo admitted finally, the man's lone eye fixed on his lap with a grimace of displeasure. "But my informants had thought we had more time and they hinted at interest in the dojutsu of the Hyuuga Clan. But if this information is accurate, I anticipate they will make a move for the Nidaime's heir."

There seemed something almost covetous in the way that Danzo's voice lingered over 'Nidaime's heir,' but Danzo had always had an almost unhealthy obsession with the man he revered the most. Koharu's lips tightened as unease set in. Perhaps the danger to Minato was far closer to home than anyone could have foreseen.

"Kumo wouldn't dare!" Homura remarked sounding remarkably gullible in his false sense of superiority.

"Why not?" Koharu countered. She was more than willing to

fan this fire if it diverted Danzo for a time. "Just removing the child removes prestige from our village and sullies our reputation in a single blow. And the temptation to convert a Senju child into a Kumo shinobi is a far too tempting prospect."

"After the Kyuubi's attack, we lost a significant portion of our forces." Danzo spoke with a callousness that Koharu did not blame the man for. War changed a person and it had certainly hardened whatever sympathies her one-time friend once had. Besides, it was hardly his ruthless attitude she objected to...it was the subversive manipulation of herself that she would no longer stand for. That and the danger posed to a child she esteemed in a much healthier manner than Danzo did. "While the reconstruction was completed rapidly, replenishing our forces is impossible unless we accept every Academy graduate--the majority that are not fit to become shinobi. If Kumo were to succeed in this venture, it is very possible that Iwa and Kumo would form an alliance and march against us if they believed there was a possibility of wiping us off the map."

"Then it seems protecting the Senju child from Kumo is our top priority, Danzo." Koharu murmured. "Though with Hatake around, the boy has one of our village's finest already. Perhaps you can arrange for Hatake's ANBU missions to be restricted until after the Kumo incident? You do have some influence in that arena." Danzo's nod was clipped and severe. "I intend to try and dissuade Hiruzen from permitting them entry at all."

"The Sandaime no longer listens to sound reason Koharu." There was a certain bitterness clinging to his words that she found rather telling. "But if you can obtain more detail regarding this visit, that would be useful."

"I will see what I can do." She sniffed slightly before standing and thrusting her empty mug into the hands of a waiting operative. "Danzo, could you do this old woman a favor and send one of your men to look at my back tomorrow?"

It was a question she had asked more and more frequent of late. An old injury flaring up and causing nothing but trouble for a kunoichi well past her expiration date.

"I'll have one of my people attend you at first light."

"Thank you." But Danzo was already looking away and was leaning forward to engage in a deep conversation with Homura about

tactics that hardly were worth discussing until more information availed itself to them.

Leaving the secret facility was always much easier than entering. And she was a frequent visitor so no one studied her more closely than they would a piece of furniture. It was both insulting and rewarding.

A shunshin took her to the base of the Hokage's tower and she stood up at the imposing building and glared at the stairs. It was a bit of a hike that her aching body did not appreciate, but Koharu made it to the top and paused for over a minute outside Hiruzen's door. Then another and another until at least a quarter of an hour had passed while she stood transfixed at the door knob.

'Go on, Koharu. If anyone can do this, it's you. You probably have the ANBU in a titter over your unusual behavior.'

When she stepped through the door, spilling light from the hall into the dimly lit room. The old man--because really, none of them had really aged gracefully--looked up like a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar; fingers quickly whipped through a few disorderly stacks of paperwork, a flash of orange disappeared into a drawer, and her old friend reached for his pipe and immediately lit it.

'Hiruzen is...resigned. His reaction suggests he expects me to react in a certain way. If this is a sign of the hold Danzo had over me...no. No time to think about that. I'll never be someone that makes Hiruzen's life easy, but maybe I can start surprising him again.'

"I think we need to have a chat, Hiruzen." Koharu spoke with the rekindled fire of a girl who had once burned down a glade of trees in a fit of rage. Without waiting for him to respond, she breezed inside and helped herself to the sake that she knew was on the top shelf sequestered behind a few dusty scrolls. She knew that Hiruzen would appreciate the gesture just as much as she would.

When she turned around, the Sandaime had already fished out two small glasses that had been settled soundlessly. Without uttering a word, Koharu opened the bottle and poured them each a hearty glass. Across her watcher's face, a thousand expressions shifted and altered fluidly with twice the amount of calculations. It was a fascinating process to see the visual effect of a Kage's mind respond to certain stimuli and it still managed to humble Koharu just a bit.

"I've been thinking about what you said." A dozen reactions; a

twitch of the eye, a slight extension of a cheek muscle and lips parting slightly. Sarutobi Hiruzen was a cautious man and it showed as he watched her like the spider watches its prey.

"Have you?" Hiruzen's tone had lightened somewhat, but the weight of his words could not be so easily measured. "And what have you taken from it?"

"That you and Danzo are more alike than you give each other credit for." Two brows surged toward the ceiling and Koharu felt her lips tug upward into a wrinkled grin. "Wordsmiths the both of you."

Hiruzen's face looked almost reluctant and Koharu knew that she had surprised him after so many years of...sameness. She liked the feeling more than she cared to admit.

"But I did remember something." She lifted her full glass and took a deep, hearty swallow. "And I remembered someone I had quite forgotten. It has been so long that it was shocking to think about."

"Who was it?" There was real, sincere interest piqued in Hiruzen's eyes. It struck Koharu then that she could not remember the last time the man had smiled at her. Such a strange thing to think about at such a peculiar time, but nevertheless it was there. And the answer niggled her terribly: it had been decades since they had laughed and there had been joy between them. They had lost so much, so terribly quickly.

"Me." There was more emotion clouding her face and her voice than she would have willingly projected, but the words came just the same. "Ever since sensei's death, I've done my best to serve this village. It isn't an easy thing advising assassination over mercy. War over peace. I've seen so many of our friends die and I've started to forget things about them. I forgot that I was more than...whatever it is that I've become."

There was a deliberate sweeping gesture as the presence of Hiruzen's ANBU vanished from the tower and the glow of sealing chakra that isolated their words and sealed them into the privacy of the office alone.

"Welcome back, Koharu." There was fondness in Hiruzen's voice and it was slight, but there was a warm smiling on her old friend's face. "It's been a long time."

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whether it was in the kitchen or pulling weeds from the flower beds. Where Naruto's rambunctious behavior tested the frayed limits of Sasuke's tolerance, Minato simply skillfully diverted Naruto in another direction and winked at Sasuke like they were conspirators of some sort. Then of course, the Senju had daringly corrected his tou-san which opened Sasuke's eyes to the very real concept that his parents were *not* infallible. In the end, Sasuke felt lucky the other boy had chosen to befriend him and had become fiercely protective of the other boy.

It seemed to be rather unheard of for the Uchiha Clan to adopt a child. His tou-san had made it no secret that he thought little of other clans so it astonished Sasuke that his parents would adopt an orphan on a whim. Nevertheless, Sasuke was old enough to notice that his kaa-san seemed to stare at Naruto for long moments and he had caught her wiping her eye more than once. Sasuke had noticed Itachi observing their parents and had opted to hold off on asking questions until he could corner his aniki. Besides, he was not exactly opposed to having Naruto around. The blonde made life more interesting. Less boring.

Even if he was just a dobe.

Peeking into the living room, Sasuke watched his kaa-san guide Naruto through a beginner's storybook. Naruto was glaring at the page like it had offended him, but the mulish look fell away when his mother whispered something that Sasuke could not quite make out into the blonde's ear.

Seeing Naruto occupied, he silently made his way to the front door and toed on his sandals. Sliding the door open, Sasuke stepped outside and made his way toward the back yard.

The sun was up high in the sky interspersed with fluffy puffs of white here and there. Itachi was easy enough to spot curled up like a cat with a book in his lap, though Sasuke was curious to see how his nii-san had paused and was staring hawkishly in the direction of the Koi pond where his friend was kneeling with his hair gleaming silver in the sunlight.

Minato was bent over with his arm extended toward the surface of the water. It seemed a little odd, but not really that weird. Glancing back to Itachi who had lowered his book with all of his focus directed to where Minato was still bent over.

What was he doing? What was the big deal?

Sasuke jogged across the back yard to where Minato was sitting and felt puzzled when the other boy did not even seem to register his presence. That struck Sasuke as odd since the other boy had clearly explained his sensory ability. Reaching the other boy, Sasuke crouched down beside him and looked at the Koi pond where Minato had a hand stretching out to almost touch the surface of the water. Sasuke shifted unhappily and looked at the scarlet eyes screwed up and focused on the pond. Sasuke bit his lip and felt his hands ball up in confusion, but he took a deep breath and tried to think about it rationally. Minato never intentionally ignored him, but still Sasuke felt uncomfortably unhappy that the other boy had not looked up at his approach.

So what was it about this stupid pond?

Being overlooked was not something Sasuke was accustomed to. Whether he was upset, wanted a snack, or asked somebody to read to him...he never had to fight for someone's attention before. Sasuke was frustrated and knew his feelings were irrational. Worse still, he heard Itachi walk up and hover nearby and Sasuke felt even more confused by the spike of resentment toward his aniki.

What was the matter with him?

Colorful fins were darting beneath the surface where Minato's fingers hovered. Sasuke opened his mouth to ask only for the water to start bubbling. Then it started to churn harshly like it did when kaa-san put a pot except the lack of steam.

"What is it?" Sasuke heard himself ask, turning from the lightly bubbling water to his friend who looked noticeably paler and looked to be breathing shallower. "Minato, are you okay?"

Behind them, Itachi had moved forward until he was crouched opposite Minato, but Sasuke was reaching out to lay a hand on Minato's shoulder and shook it slightly.

"Hold on." Minato muttered tightly and submerged his hand in the water. "There!"

"Very impressive, Minato-kun." Itachi complimented from the side.

Sasuke's jaw dropped as he turned and watched water rise like

a thin snake and twist in the air like a sentient being. The tendril of water spun about twice before collapsing back into the pond below.

"That was amazing." Sasuke breathed. Gripping his friend's shoulder, his smile fell slightly as he saw how exhausted the other boy looked."Are you okay?"

"It wore me out a bit, but I'm fine." The red eyes blinked owlishly and the other boy dabbed his forehead with the back of his sleeve and grinned broadly. "I'm great, actually!"

"How did you do that?" Sasuke asked a little quieter, feeling happy for the other boy's accomplishment but at the same time worried he was falling behind. Itachi was already miles ahead...he did not want Minato leaving him behind too.

"I just wanted to see if I could." Minato replied nonchalantly, shaking residual water from his fingers. Suddenly the other boy lit up and he addressed Itachi who was watching the both of them rather intensely. "Is it true that most families use the same sort of jutsu?"

Sasuke frowned, wondering what the point of that was while watching his brother nod once in acknowledgement.

"Right then, I heard that Senju Tobirama was famous for his suiton jutsu so...I thought maybe I could find out if I'm like him." Sasuke felt Minato grab his hand and pull him toward his brother; Sasuke allowed it, feeling more perplexed than anything else."What is the speciality of the Uchiha Clan? Can Sasuke learn to do that?"

A flush of shame gutted Sasuke's core as his friend instantly moved to include him. Envy was a sorry creature and he felt more ashamed than ever at allowing it to overcome his friendship with Minato. It would not happen again. Sasuke refused to feel so hideously jealous toward his friends that had already made his life so much richer.

"The Uchiha Clan is proficient in both Katon ninjutsu and genjutsu." Itachi reported the information quietly. It was common information to Sasuke even though he had yet to create the fireball that was a rite of passage in the Clan. "While it is likely that my otouto will be proficient with fire, there is always a possibility that he is gifted with a rare second affinity or a different primary one all-together. Until we test the possibility, there are only assumptions and no certainties."

"I might not use fire?" He asked somewhat stunned. It had never occurred to him that he would be anything other than a typical Uchiha.

"Even if you had no natural affinity for fire, you would develop a talent for using them regardless since our Clan possesses an impressive repertoire of Katon ninjutsu that would go to waste should you not learn them." Itachi explained with far more patience than his father had ever demonstrated. Fugaku barked orders and offered no explanations, which made learning practically impossible. If not for Itachi and kaa-san, Sasuke was unsure that he would have finished reading let alone mastery of shinobi exercises. "I had no intention of instructing you in advanced materials, however, you have mastered a genin-level chakra control exercise thanks to Minato-kun. That being the case, I will consider providing additional instruction to you at a later juncture. And perhaps I will acquire the necessary item that will allow us to know your affinity for certain, otouto."

Sasuke felt like the floor had vanished beneath his feet and left him in a state of free fall. His arm lashed out to grab onto his brother for the dual purpose of determining whether this moment was a dream or a particularly cruel genjutsu. It was not that Itachi had demonstrated he was unwilling to spend time with him, but he had been begging his sibling, for nearly a year, to spend time training him. And this time Itachi was using that tone of voice that implied he was serious and not just talking around the subject.

"You're going to train me?" Sasuke heard his voice quaver and winced at the display of weakness.

"Providing that mother has no objections." Itachi responded so casually that Sasuke wanted to scream in partial elation and frustration. "Yes."

"Great." Minato clapped his hands together next to him and Sasuke swallowed down the lump in his throat. "I'm starving. Sasuke, you want to go eat?"

"Sure." Sasuke grinned at his friend and felt happy that the other boy was broaching the distance of familiarity.

Following the other boy back inside, Sasuke found himself rather excited by the future prospects. But more than that, he promised himself that he would not let jealousy get in the way of his friendships.

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Minato glanced around the empty training area that Kakashi had said they would meet at with feelings of nostalgia running through his veins The little bridge over the stream creaked as he walked across it and the glade beyond welcomed the Senju with the scent of damp grass.

"I'm sure he'll be here any minute." Shisui remarked with a clipped tone and continued to pace the length of the bridge.

"Doubtful." Itachi offered from where he was perched on the rail. The other boy had just tugged a scroll free of his supplies and was reading it thoughtfully.

Minato really ought to have expected Kakashi to continue Obito's legacy of annoying idiosyncrasies. All the signs had been there before his death match with his misguided student. He really was going to have to put some thought into dealing with Obito at a later date.

"Kakashi is your best bet in the fight due to the gaki's connection to that Kamui."

Minato deliberately ignored the bijuu that huffed and settled back down for a rest while watching the Uchiha chunin slowly lose the fight with patience.

"Oh come on." Shisui shifted from sandal to sandal, his Sharingan even popping into sight before vanishing back to ebony. "He said he would be here to visit Minato this morning at nine! It's a quarter after...he'll be here in no time. He has to be!"

Avoidance tactics, Kakashi? You'll have to do better than that. I know just the thing to lure you out.

Crouching down, Minato scratched the skin around his ankle and subtly extended his sensory web. There were several dozen chakra signatures nearby; the Senju discarded any clusters of four since there was high degree of probability that they were genin teams. To the west near the memorial stone, Minato paused over Kakashi's signature sadly. Continuing to reach, he felt a few pairs that were not the individual he was searching for. Finally, just to the north of their location, Minato pinged a chakra signature that was remarkable for feeling so vibrant and compressed.
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Bingo. Springing to his feet, the youngster tore off in the direction of his target at a loping run.

"Minato!" Shisui hollered after him. "Where are you going?!"

"I'm just going to go look around while we wait." Minato called over his shoulder, grinning as flecks of dew dampened his toes. "You can wait there if you want."

Hearing vague mutterings about "brats with too much energy," Minato ran even faster up the slight incline, down and up another hill. It was closer than it really should have been, but some people were predictable in their habits. And Kakashi and his associates had always fallen into a pattern of behavior that apparently survived years later.

Over the final rise, a hulk of a man was performing a series of rapid katas that twisted and turned with overpowering force that could no doubt kill some with a single blow if the connection met the right area.

"Teach me!" Minato shrieked in a perfect mimicry of childish excitement. It was inevitably worth it to see the bowl-cut man stumble mid-kick and instantly stare at him with a puzzled look.

The moment barely lasted a second before a vigorous fist struck the air and a broad smile extended over the man's features.

"Yosh! Such a youthful attitude!" There looked to be actual tears forming in the man's eyes."It is my joy to meet such an enthusiastic pupil! I am Konoha's Majestic Green Beast: Maito Gai!"

The most powerful defenders of Konoha were always accompanied by distinctive quirks. Minato had learned over time that it was just better to take these things in stride with a wide smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Gai-san." Minato returned with an enthusiastic, though comparatively muted, greeting. "By any chance, do you know a Hatake Kakashi?"

There was no other word for it: Gai exploded. Green limbs flew wide in every direction, pearly teeth seemed to almost glow such was their brightness. Minato backpedalled a step and swallowed shallowly. Perhaps his tenure as a Kage had *not* prepared him enough for moments like this.

"Do I *know* Kakashi?" Gai seemed far too keen and far too

pleased and Minato's stomach turned to ice as his plan seemed to amplify and backfire as the boisterous character approached him until he was forced to crane his neck only for an oversized thumb to cross his eyes at the end of his nose.

"Do I know Kakashi?!" Gai's voice booms across the clearing like a roar of thunder; birds screech in protest and take off in a flutter of rings while at least three rabbits tear out of the clearing like a fox was on their tails. Minato recoiled and blinked moisture out of his eyes while the man continued to ramble. "Kakashi is my incredibly hip rival! From the time of the Academy, Kakashi and I have engaged in challenge after challenge. To this day, we are tied in wins and losses, but the next time I see him, I will defeat him or I shall climb the Hokage Mountain 500 times with a boulder attached to my back."

"Perhaps you should try something less hazardous." Minato replied after a moment and felt a tension headache building in the back of his skull. "But if you are my nii-san's rival, than perhaps you can teach me something, Gai-san."

Maito Gai was eccentric and capable of annoying shinobi from all walks of life. The taijutsu genius did not have optimal levels of facial recognition and had difficulty referencing Bingo Book information in combat, but the man was no fool. Gai had taken part in assassination missions when Minato was the Yondaime; it was not the man's speciality since his role was mainly suitable for being a squad muscle, but he had performed that function on missions before. People seemed to forget that Gai's personality was a better camouflage than almost anything simply because it worked. People forgot to take Gai seriously and did not realize that there was a tactical working mind behind the crazy persona. Kakashi had seen it in action and surely the Sandaime was aware that Gai was not as dim as he might seem at first glance.

"Kakashi's otouto?" The words were soft this time, lacking Gai's natural vibrance. Minato was almost afraid when the big man fell quiet, but the taijutsu master looked more thoughtful than put-off by the announcement.

"That's what the test results said." Minato carefully arranged his face in a bashful smile, even ducking his chin to play up the age card. Gai of course...lapped it up with a resurged...youthfulness. Thankfully Minato sensed Itachi and Shisui approaching from the rear. It would be nice to have a buffer between Gai's enthusiasm and...everything else.

"Yosh! I will happily bless the brother of my greatest rival with my knowledge!" Gai's eye sockets seemed to illuminate briefly and then there was palm trees, sand, and waves crashing upon the shore. Wait--when had Gai mastered genjutsu? Minato froze rather stupefied as Gai stepped closer as if to embrace him.

Fuck no. There just had to be some limits. Pumping chakra into his limbs, his small body protested the action for an instant but he was already arcing backward through the air and he grasped Shisui--who, funnily enough, seemed to be failing at breaking the genjutsu--and thrust the horrified chunin forward.

"Oh Gai-san!" Minato chirped, sensing Shisui and Itachi stiffen up beside him. The former Kage felt almost bad that the two Uchiha teens had already made the acquaintance of his prankster side: Kushina would be so proud!

"This is Shisui-nii." Minato squeezed the frozen Uchiha's arm and played up the adoring look he was shining Shisui's direction to which the chunin smiled back weakly. Minato peered around Shisui's arm and shot Itachi a wink that had the other boy twitching slightly. "And Itachi-san. They are really good with genjutsu and katon techniques. But I don't think their taijutsu is very good. Maybe you could help them improve?"

Perhaps it was the absurdity of the Uchiha Clan ever being coerced into doing anything or perhaps it was just fate being fickle, but neither Uchiha uttered a protest. Itachi looked like he had been gutted and Shisui looked greed around the gills, but neither Uchiha had spoken a word.

All in a day's work.

"Of course! I will help all three of you reach a new level of potential or I will do a thousand cartwheels!"

"Perfect!" Minato clapped his hands together while Gai approached and began shouting orders at the dazed looking Uchiha boys.

Ah...today was gonna be great.

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Kakashi stood in front of the memorial stone with a bowed
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head and patted the smooth surface, fingers mapping from Obito down to Rin and down to Namikaze Minato.

"Obito." Kakashi scratched a finger over his masked nose. "You would probably be laughing at me if you could see me right now. This might sound hard to believe, but I have an otouto now. You would probably have found it cool that I got family out of a series of jutsu gone wrong. The Sandaime's information was not much to go on, but the fact of the matter is that the blood sample said we share the same tou-san."

Kakashi leaned against the memorial awkwardly. If Obito were actually here, the idiot would probably be screaming at him and calling him a variety of vicious, colorful names. He wanted to experience that more than ever.

"Minato...it's hard to call him that, but I have to get over it." Kakashi swallows and continues speaking to a ghost that may never hear his confession. "I think most people would say that Minato looks like the Nidaime, but when I saw that boy, I remembered my tou-san. The boy's hair is not a spiky mess like mine, but the angles and the bone structure are all Hatake. You never saw me without my mask, but I suppose Minato resembles me. It doesn't really matter, I suppose. I'm already late meeting him. I'm always on time for my missions, but I think you rubbed off on me after you died, Obito. So my otouto is just going to have to get used to waiting for me. You were worth waiting for even if I didn't appreciate it at the time. I will be too, right?"

Kakashi fingered a kunai, flipping it between his fingers and scraping away a fleck of dried blood that he had somehow missed after his last mission.

"I wonder what you would think if you saw me now." The words were like winter on his tongue and Kakashi felt his chin sink to his chest and his eyes began to water. "You would probably be disappointed in who I've become. I'm afraid of a four year old child, Obito. I just don't think I can do this, but I know I can't give up. You would never give up and I'm not about to abandon my comrades. I learned that lesson from you better than any other. I only wish I had learned it sooner. Maybe things would have ended up different."

A low warble sounded from next to him and Kakashi watched a tawny songbird drop onto the memorial stone next to him and cock it's head at him curiously. The beak parted slightly and a tiny seed fell

off onto the monument. A moment later and the little fellow's wings beat frantically and the little songbird was airborne. Kakashi watched until the little guy had vanished into the cover of trees and pushed himself away from the monument warily.

"Alright, I can take a hint."

Besides, he had better find his sibling before the Uchiha duo took him back to the Uchiha Compound. That...would make things a little awkward since Kakashi was certain that Fugaku had never quite forgiven him for having their prized dojutsu--even if it was a handicap just as much as a strength.

A few bursts of speed allowed his nose to seek out the scent of family. Grass, rabbits, and his cute little otouto had definitely passed this way. Strangely enough, he detected another presence that smelled familiar. Kakashi almost had a heart attack when he recognized the smell and immediately burst into a controlled run that ended with him in a tree overlooking a clearing of four individuals.

"If this is my punishment for being tardy...I might really have to think about that." Kakashi muttered under his breath as he blinked at some poor attempt to dispel the illusion in front of him.

Uchiha Shisui was running the perimeter of the training area with a rock--more of a boulder really--tucked under each arm. The chunin was huffing and puffing and covered from head to toe in bruises, grass, and dirt. The boy's legs were shaky and looked ready to collapse underneath him, but the boy kept running: Kakashi felt for the poor kid. Gai's version of endurance training was brutal and it was obvious that the chunin had just had the excrement kicked out of him not long before.

Across the clearing, Kakashi made a low moan of despair at the sight of Maito Gai with his coined eerie smile and his body in a traditional Goken stance; clinging to Gai's back, Kakashi's baby brother was staring over Gai's shoulder with rapt attention, arms and legs like an octopus around Gai's body. Itachi, looking worse for wear, had his Sharingan activated and was charging Gai.

Kakashi had been the ANBU in charge of scouting Itachi for ANBU. The plan was to snap up the clan heir after the kid returned from the exams. In theory they could have extended the offer already, but the Sandaime had asked them to hold off until after the upcoming exams being held in a couple months.

In his assessment, Kakashi had found that Uchiha Itachi was an absolute genius. The kid's chakra control was refined enough to keep up with any medic out there; it was almost a pity the boy did not show the inclination to take that line of study. The boy's taijutsu form was flawless, quick, and absolutely lethal. And his ninjutsu skills were far from shabby: Itachi's katon techniques might as well have been jounin level at this point. If the kid ever developed additional skills in genjutsu...the boy would be able to take anyone and everyone down without even trying. This was without even mentioning infiltration skills or the tactical mind that could outwit a Nara without so much as breaking a sweat. Uchiha Itachi was going places and was certainly one of Leaf's rising stars: ANBU was going to be lucky to have him.

And yet...Uchiha Itachi did not have a disinterested, impassive expression on his face today. No, today the ebony eyes were flashing, his longish hair was mussed, and his clothing was tattered and held together in some places by only a few threads. There was blood dripping from a cut lip that the boy made a hissing sound at when he wiped it away with the back of his hand. All of this and the Uchiha charged in the direction of Maito Gai--Kakashi's best friend even if he would never admit it--who had that eerie smile on his face and simply danced out of the way before planting his foot in Itachi's stomach and knocking him flying.

"Hang in their cous!" Shisui shouted a breathless bout of encouragement that Itachi did not bother responding to.

"I had heard you were the greatest taijutsu master in Konoha, but I never truly appreciated your level of skill." Itachi complimented Gai with a grimace and it was impossible to miss Gai's exuberant overreaction.

"Yosh! The fires of my youthly determination have inspired even the cool attitudes of the Uchiha Clan!" There was genuine tears of joy in Gai's eyes and Kakashi did not miss little Minato's eyes bug out as the small boy clung a little tighter.

Before his little brother was thrown off due to Gai's excitement, Kakashi appeared and snatched the small body off Gai's back. The small body instantly twisted in his grip and wound far too small arms around his neck and giggled patiently.

"I knew you would come, Kakashi." The words were barely louder than a whisper but they warmed Kakashi's heart more intensely than he was prepared for.

"Thanks for watching him, Gai." Kakashi remarked blandly, but really meant it. Feeling more confidant, he gave the Uchiha pair a jaunty wave. "Gai, if you would keep training these boys for a few minutes, I'm going to take Minato over there for a little chat. Perhaps you can even convince one of these lucky kids to be a permanent sparring partner."

Kakashi's lone eye twinkled at the shudder of visible horror running through the jogging Shisui's body, but even he was unprepared for Itachi's bold answer.

"It would certainly be an effective method of improving my taijutsu."

"Are you kidding me!" Shisui screamed at the same time as Gai shouted. "Yosh! Itachi-san! My rival is perceptive as always! What a fine sparring partner you would be! I can see that you are nearly as motivated as I am to improve!"

Yeah, they were so out of there. Kakashi executed a quick shunshin that took them next to a river a short distance away.

The water was flowing peacefully as this was a rather calm section of the river. Kakashi carefully eased the small boy down and Minato flashed him a smile before wandering to the water's edge and plunking himself down next to it.

Fuck. Kakashi fidgeted as his shoulders tensed up. What exactly was he supposed to do now? What was he supposed to say? Somehow discussing his last mission--assassinating some prominent lord for reasons never specified--was going to win him any favors. Reading habits? Training? Gai? Their dead father? What exactly did he have to talk about?

Movement down by the water dragged the copy-nin off-guard and he stared to where Minato had arranged himself so he was lying on his stomach and reaching with one hand over to where the water was brushing his fingertips. Wait. Kakashi wandered closer, narrowed in thought as he watched the water that was a good twelve centimeters below rise from the river bed as the boy's hands glowed with chakra.

What in the hell? Who had taught him to do that? Kakashi's immediate thought took him back to a moment where his father caught him pouring over jutsu scrolls at age three and had been working diligently to unlock his chakra. Had Minato been really

teaching himself?

"That's impressive." Kakashi commented, falling into a low crouch next to the river.

"Thank you!" Minato flashed him a smile once before the chakra faded in the boy's palm and the water fell back into the main flow with a token splash. "I got it to work at the Koi pond in Sasuke's back yard too."

Kakashi snorted, picturing the pristine gardens of the Uchiha used for something as common as early elemental manipulation for a Senju brat no less. 'Although,' he snuck a peek at the silver haired boy that was wiping sweat away from his forehead. 'This kid is definitely a Hatake too.'

"How long have you been trying to do this?"

"Hmm." Minato hummed, the scarlet eyes blinking in thought. "Just today. I wanted to see if I could do it."

Just today. Ridiculous. Almost as ridiculous as a genin at five.

"It looks like you managed something most new genin can't do." Kakashi remarks dryly while reaching out to tap the boy's nose with a finger. Watching the boy recoil with a rebellious squeal brings back that same warmth as before that spreads and Kakashi is almost eager to experience it again. This time, the silver haired boy dodged the touch, nimbly launched himself to his feet, and raced around before tackling Kakashi from behind.

Or so he thought. Kakashi found himself smirking cheerily at the outraged look on the small boy's face as he realizes he had been duped. The pint sized spitfire chucks the log that Kakashi used for a Kawarimi into the river.

"Fine! If you want to use jutsu when we're playing, you have to teach me!" Minato leapt to his feet, brushing aside silvery bangs and pointing at him accusingly and Kakashi found himself waggling his fingers at the younger boy cheekily.

"Maa, I don't recall agreeing to such a thing." Kakashi responded, his heart beating a little faster as the boy crosses his arms and shoots him a clearly unimpressed look that would be much more impressive on an older individual. On a four year old...adorable.

"It's the rules. If you're going to use shinobi tactics, you have to teach them." Logical and somehow seemingly undemanding. Did that even make sense?

"I suppose that's fair." Kakashi hopped down with a smirk wide beneath his mask. After all, he had never specified *when* he would teach him the jutsu.

"Thank you, nii-san." The kid looked up at him with such a damned hopeful, sober look that Kakashi felt the tension melting away almost completely.

Setting his hand atop the small head, he pet the surprisingly soft strands like he would one of his ninken. The boy quirked a brow and murmured softly under his breath.

"I'm not sure that I know how to do be a family, pup." Kakashi cautioned the child, feeling it was his duty to be honest.

"I've never had parents or siblings either." Kakashi heard the slight quaver in the small voice and those red eyes fastened onto him and pieced him to the very core. "So you'll have to tell me if I'm doing something wrong?"

'How could you ever do something wrong?' Kakashi wondered. If someone was going to screw up it was going to be him. It was always, always him.

"We'll just have to figure things out together right, aniki?" Kakashi felt something squeeze his hand and looked down dumbfounded at his own fingers perfectly interlaced with the much smaller digits. Looking back to the boy, the red markings on the boy's cheeks seemed to almost glow when the boy flashed a toothy smile his direction.

"I suppose you're right, pup." Kakashi fished for something to divert them to. "You hungry?"

"You are a lot later than you said you would be." There was a bit of chiding in the boy's voice and Kakashi vowed that he would attempt to be better for his brother. Everyone else could wait but...this boy might be worth extra effort.

"Sorry." He apologized without really meaning it. The quiet scoff next to him made Kakashi realize that his otouto--god that still sounded bizarre--was not buying his act either. The kid was perceptive

and ridiculously sharp for his age. Perhaps this was how his father felt dealing with a prodigy?

"How about we go out to eat?" Kakashi threw the small boy a bone.

"Okay!" Suddenly he was assaulted from behind and the ANBU went rigid until his nose kicked in. Kakashi grunted again as he was literally used as a climbing post and the small boy had seated himself with his legs dangling over his shoulders and hands buried in his already wild silver hair.

"Comfy?" He asked sarcastically as he shifted the little imp's weight.

"Yep!" The brat replied a little too casually and Kakashi knew his precious little brother knew exactly what buttons he was pressing. "Shisui did it for me and I rather enjoy being high. You're really tall so it's especially fun."

"I could just Kawarimi and leave you to fall." He threatened.

"If you do, I'll tell Gai-san I changed my mind about the leotard he offered me." The tone was subtle, but there was practically killing intent buried in that sugary sweet blackmail.

"Don't even joke about that!" Kakashi gasped harshly, imagining a pint-sized Hatake--Senju, whatever--running around with silver hair flying behind him like a cape and wearing that skin-tight monstrosity. "I forbid it!"

"Okay." The response was far too agreeable and it instantly put the jounin on edge.

"What's the catch?" Kakashi asked as they appeared on the outskirts of the village and started walking down a mostly empty street.

"You have to train my friends and I at least twice a week." Oh, this kid was good. Maybe even better than Kakashi had been at this age. "Unless you're on a mission since you're a shinobi."

"And you are banned from wearing spandex for life." Kakashi shivered as they trudged down the lane, garnering more than a few looks from passing shinobi. Fortunately none of them were brave enough to approach at this point.

"Um, nii-san?" Minato paused, the hands mussing his own spiky hair pausing their motions.

"Hmm?"

"Shouldn't we have gotten Itachi and Shisui?"

"One of the number one rules about shinobi is that it's rude to interrupt training, otouto." Kakashi replied gleefully and a bit vengefully. "Besides, you saw how much fun Shisui and Itachi were having. We would not want to deprive them of that quality training."

"I think Itachi was enjoying himself." The words were saturated with disbelief and Kakashi found himself nodding in abstract disagreement. That *had* been weird. Hopefully nothing disastrous would come of that...

"How about we eat and then pick up Naruto and Sasuke for some fun at the park?" Kakashi suggested, thinking back to the ambush training Pakkun had put the trio through and how much fun it would have been to participate. He could do that!

"Sure!"

They were almost to the stand when Minato laughed aloud.

"We're not going back for Shisui and Itachi, are we?"

"Well done, pup!" He praised his little otouto for his insight. "They'll figure it out eventually."

The boy on his shoulders merely giggled again and Kakashi found himself content--legitimately happy, for the first time since the Kyuubi's attack had stolen away the last good thing in his life.

Perhaps having a pup around won't be so bad after all...

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Smoke immediately assailed Jiraiya's nostrils as he steps into the room and scanned the crowd. The Bloody Kunai was a hub of entertainment in the seediest neighborhood of Otafuku Gai. On paper, it was an ordinary establishment that paraded scantily clad women and men while serving alcohol and providing gambling opportunities. If you looked past the dimly lit booths that reeked of bodily fluids and
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smoke, the clientele was mostly lowlifes and criminals that paid the establishment a fee to look the other way when they conducted a range of black market exchanges.

It was a prime location for illegal deals or to get wasted having a good time, but it pained Jiraiya to think that this was exactly the sort of place Tsunade spent her time. It was no wonder the Hime never recovered if this was the sort of people she spent her time around.

Jiraiya grinned broadly at the voluptuous redhead with her adorable auburn curls framing her heart-shaped face and felt a pang of regret from south of the border. Such a pity that a fine piece like that would go to waste.

Snaking his meaty hand down to cup her fingers, Jiraiya's thumb scraped over the manicured nail and felt a trace of a callus underneath the hands. The signs were almost gone, but the Sannin could tell that the placement that the girl had likely been from an agricultural background; poor thing had probably come to the city searching for a better life and fell into this profession like so many of the other girls in this line of work. And on any other day, Jiraiya would be more appreciative of her misfortune.

Eyeing the sequined top the girl was wearing her small, but pert breasts, Jiraiya allowed himself to grin wider and boldly placed one heavy palm against the fabric of her shirt and gave it a delightful squeeze; simultaneously, the Sannin folded several ryo into the girl's hand and leaned forward until his lips brushed the shell of her ear.

"Any other night and I would have stayed in your company all night, my dear." A perverse giggle escaped his lips and Jiraiya is forced to use every ounce of his self control to master his lecherous desires: it really didn't help when he felt the nipple underneath the fabric of the shirt harden at his touch. "But I'm afraid that I'm looking for someone very specific. A beautiful woman with blonde hair being followed around by a girl with a pig."

"Oh." The prostitute pulled away still looking dazed and almost disappointed as his hand fell away, thought not without a parting pat to her curvaceous rear-end. "She owe you money too? You're the third fellow today! That sucker should still be upstairs!"

Tsunade really had inherited her grandfather's horrid luck when it came to bets.

"You truly are lovely." The toad-sage felt a rush of victory as the girl's cheeks flush a comely shade of pink and he slides another ryo into her palm. If it were any other day...damn. Jiraiya gave her ass a firm swat and ambled toward the stairs.

The stairs jostle an uncomfortably stiff package and Jiraiya has never been more thankful that his clothing conceals extra bulges. Sliding his hands into his pocket, he fingers the brief message that had lead him to this moment and almost regrets reaching the top of the stairs.

Tsunade had never been a reasonable individual. She was quick to lose her temper and proved just as vicious off the battlefield as she was on it. There had been a lightness in Tsunade when they first met, but that joy had been snuffed out slowly by accumulated sorrows. Now it had been years since he had seen the woman he loved and he was afraid to find out how hardened she was by grief and despair.

Taking a final breath, Jiraiya pasted on an easy grin for the benefit of one of the establishment's employees at the top of the stairs and instantly scanned the room littered with various gambling tables before finally settling on pigtails and a familiar coat in the far corner of the room.

As he approached, Jiraiya studied Tsunade carefully and squeezed his Kage's missive once before coating himself with a simple genjutsu that simply made his appearance less memorable to anyone that did not know him. The Senju woman was staring at the cards in her hand with a displeased curl of the lip. Tsunade glared at a hideously large pile of chips that the dealer passed her with polite congratulations that never quite felt sincere. Golden eyes stared unblinking at the pile and her deceptively delicate fingers where quivering ever so slightly.

'Don't be afraid, Hime. Whatever Sarutobi-sensei has in mind, we'll face this together. Don't be afraid.'

Physically, Senju Tsunade was probably the strongest woman alive and there were only a handful of individuals capable of matching her in battle. Significantly less individuals stood a real chance of killing her in a fight. Jiraiya was one of the few which was why he felt an incredible amount of resentment for being chosen for this mission. And while he was angry, Jiraiya was loyal. Certainly he would exchange some harsh words with his Kage when they got back to the

village, but until then he would obey them.

And the reason had better damn well be good or Jiraiya had every intention of flattening the old monkey if his excuse fell short.

Before the dealer could announce a follow up round, Jiraiya plunked an armored hand onto the table and flashed the irritated losers a broad grin.

"Sorry to interrupt your game, but I'm afraid that the lady is occupied at the bar for a drink." Jiraiya winked at the disgruntled losers that had bet against Tsunade and expected--because betting against the Legendary Sucker was always a sure thing--to win big. Turning his attention on Tsunade, the toad sage found his tone reflexively gentling as he stared into the doe-eyed look from the woman he so admired. "Long time no see, Tsunade."

"Jiraiya?" The tone was incredulously--not a good sign considering acute senses were important for survival in their profession--and her breath only faintly smelled of sake, which was a good thing for him considering how negatively intoxication impacted the medic's temper. "What are you doing here?"

There was that first bloom of suspicion that sent color racing over beautiful, pale cheekbones. Tsunade really was the fruition of all his fantasies.

"Can't I just be visiting an old friend?" Jiraiya deflected casually, while pulling out a scroll and casually sealing away the enormous mountain of chips while onlookers squawked indignantly in the background.

"If it were actually true, then maybe." Tsunade's fingers balled up dangerously as her winnings disappeared, but Jiraiya wisely stepped out of range, pocket the scroll, and confidently made for the counter. Sure enough, the sound of a chair scraping the floor loudly and the click of heels behind him came just as he slid onto a stool at the bar.

"Where's Shizune-chan?" Jiraiya stalled, while motioning to the bartender for two cups and a bottle. "You didn't ditch the kid, did you?"

"Shows what you know." Tsunade scoffed before pouring herself a full glass and tossing it back like the seasoned veteran she was. "She's reading some of my notes on spinal surgery, thank you

very much."

"You actually teach?" Jiraiya intentionally saturated his voice with disbelief, feeling pleased with himself when a spider web of cracks appeared along Tsunade's glass. "Glad to hear it, Hime."

"Careful, Jiraiya." The brush to her pride seemed to have revived the woman and she was eyeing him from the corner of her eye. "Social visits aren't your thing and they certainly were never mine. What do you want?"

Jiraiya wanted to lie. He wanted to skid around the truth until Tsunade finally punched his lights out. But delaying the inevitable would only be hurtful in the long run.

"Okay, Hime." Jiraiya reached out and gulped down his round of liquid courage and savored the burn. "We've been recalled to Konoha."

"Absolutely not!" There is fury in Tsunade's voice and he sensed the chakra gathering in her fist. Jiraiya lunged to the side and snagged the Senju's forearm, diverting the blow into open air and preventing the impending property damage.

"Your temper is as destructive as ever." The comment was subtle, but the implied warning certainly registered with his comrade considering she twisted her weight and yanked her hand away with a rough jerk.

"I'm not going back!" Tsunade hissed, anger winning out over grief and the floor groaned warningly as she stepped into his personal space aggressively. "I will *never* go back."

Around them, patrons and serving staff alike were staring; some apprehensively and some seemed almost eager to see a round of something exciting. Jiraiya placed his hand on Tsunade's shoulder and squeezed warningly.

"Never say never, Tsunade." Jiraiya's voice quieted as it was overcome by a surge of pity. "Now sit down. If there is someone that should be making a scene, it should be me."

Tsunade threw herself back into her seat and glared at the countertop. Jiraiya just sat back down and motioned for another round of drinks that were brought by a much warier bartender that plonked them down before retreating like a frightened mouse.

"I'm done, Jiraiya." Tsunade spoke into her cup. It was the same line she had been reciting for years and was not nearly as impactful as it had been the day she finally disappeared from Konoha.

"One of us has to lose, Tsunade." His thoughts strayed to Orochimaru and the heavy toll that accompanied his disappearance. And then, Jiraiya thought again to the message that weighed upon him so heavily. "You don't exactly have a choice in the matter."

"How do you figure that?" Tsunade snorted and Jiraiya's eyes closed for a moment in regret.

"Because if you don't come back with me, you'll be declared a missing-nin." Jiraiya tossed another drink back, not really giving two-fucks what Tsunade thought at this point. Next to him, his old friend had become abnormally still in contrast to Jiraiya who felt far too uneasy to remain resting for long.

"You're lying." Denial was something Tsunade excelled at. Now was no exception.

Reaching into his jacket, he withdrew the note from his Kage and slammed it onto the counter like a gauntlet.

"See for yourself." His words were bitter because this moment would determine whether Jiraiya would be left alone to stare at the backs of both his friends rather than just Orochimaru. Tsunade had to come back to Konoha because Jiraiya was not sure he would survive otherwise. There was a rustle as Tsunade's hands fumbled with the paper before finally pulling open the scroll.

"I don't know why we're being recalled." No reason could be good enough to threaten someone he cared about. Jiraiya had lost enough without adding Tsunade to that mold. Now Tsunade was becoming far too quiet and he was feeling more and more uneasy by the second. "I don't believe there is an armed conflict that the village is preparing for since I would have heard about it before they did. But our sensei would not have asked us back unless he had no choice. I have to believe that."

"Always the optimist after all this time, Jiraiya." Tsunade snorted, though her arms were folded around her enormous bosom in a gesture certainly intended to be self-comforting. Jiraiya longed to put his arms around her but he knew his attentions would be unwelcome and would ultimately be detrimental.

"I thought about killing myself after Orochimaru, you know." It was a whispered confession.

Tsunade's attention snapped up looking more alert than he had seen her all evening.

"I never wanted to die, not really." Jiraiya continued, rolling his empty glass between his hands and letting the condensation dampen his warm hands. "But I remember feeling like nothing had ever felt worse. Not the time you broke my bones. Not being stabbed, burned, or nearly drowned. Not even Minato's death left me feeling as miserable as I did the day that Orochimaru left us. It was only for a moment, but death seemed appealing in that brief moment. I know that you've felt it." Jiraiya listened and was rewarded by the tiniest sniff from the blonde woman. "You know what it's like to lose someone and wish for nothing more than for everything to just be 'over.' I know you have."

"Then you know why I can't go back." Tsunade shuddered and Jiraiya heard the tears that refused to fall from the ache of her voice.

"But you will." Swiveling on the stool, Jiraiya turned and snatched Tsunade's hand from her side and clasped it in between his larger hands. He expected her to yell at him, hit him, anything but stare at him with a dull, pained look that made him swallow down the smarmy smile he had intended to use and allow his eyes to soften as he stared at her appreciatively. "Because if something ever happened to you..." He fumbled his words and scratched his head awkwardly. "Let's just say that I don't care if you stay inside Konoha for five minutes after meeting with sensei, but you'll go. I'll bust you out of there myself if that's what you want, but you're going to make the trip back with me."

Tsunade did not respond right away, but she didn't exactly pull away either. Jiraiya gave her hand a squeeze and watched Tsunade gnaw at her bottom lip and her mouth twisted into a mask of aggrieved pain. He also saw traces of panic, but they vanished almost as quickly as they came.

"Just long enough to see what he wants." Tsunade conceded, her shoulders falling forward and her bangs falling into her face like a veil. "Then I'm gone again."

"We better collect your winnings and pick up Shizune then." Jiraiya stood then, tugging Tsunade up with him. The woman's

posture is almost completely hunched over and he can feel the out of control surges in her chakra that are definitely not in line with her normal behavior. "It's about time you win, Tsunade."

"Every time I win...I know something terrible is about to happen." Tsunade remarked glumly, eyes fixated more on the floor than the exchange counter they're walking toward. "The last time I won, the Yondaime killed himself sealing the damned Kyuubi."

Jiraiya winced and forcefully banished thoughts of the man he had cherished like his own child and thought fleetingly of poor little Naruto languishing in an orphanage. If he was going back...he would have to check in on the kid. Maybe take him out for some ramen if sensei thought it was alright.

They stepped out of the building and inhaled a breath of fresh air consisting of cinnamon from the bakery down the street, much from the inn's stables two doors down, and the scent of the river nearby.

"Well, this time was probably just because I was here, Hime." Jiraiya tried to get Tsunade to loosen up a little. "Because you know that I'm more than happy to have a willing muse for my--"

Jiraiya performed a rapid Kawarimi that no doubt saved him the trouble of sore ribs.

"Almost got me that time, Hime!" Just like old times.

"You'll be enjoying a sling by the time I'm done with you!" Jiraiya merely winked mischievously at her, smile widening when he saw her lips quirk. Oh yeah, he still had it. Yep, just like old times.

Chapter End Notes

I think now that this chapter is done, we can really get the ball rolling.

On a side note, I've been agonizing over team assignments for Team 7, 8, 9 and 10. I believe I've finally decided what I'm going to do. Only one sensei will remain the same and only one team of three will make it out the same. Feel free to predict! (Yes, I know it probably seems like it won't be too soon)

Anyway, I hope you all mostly enjoyed this chapter. Next chapter Tsunade will make it into town. :)

Chapter 8: Breaking the Cycle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mikoto looked from the hairbrush to the child smiling bashfully with his hands pressed together in gesture of supplication. Unwillingly, she felt her lips twitch upward and her insides melt from the overdose of cuteness. As as an expert in genjutsu that distorts reality in the mind, she was rather miffed that she could be so easily subverted by a pint-sized boy batting his eyelashes.

"Hop up here, Minato-chan." Mikoto snatched the brush, twirled it between her fingers, and patted the kitchen stool invitingly. Minato scurried up like a squirrel and grinned knowingly. Cheeky little brat knew he had her wrapped around his finger. Idly, she wondered exactly when she had become a sucker for children.

"Did you sleep alright?" She inquired, feeling her lips quirk again when the child murmured happily under her attentions.

"Aside from being a little cramped, it was pretty good." The small boy pushed back into the brush and held perfectly still when she encountered a tangle that she had to work out of the boy's hair.

"It's a rather large futon in that room. It should be more than large enough for you two boys and Shisui." She said, wracking her brain as she pictured the large bedroom. Nothing stood out to explain why the bed would feel cramped. Cozy perhaps, but cramped? "Is my Naruto stealing your blankets again?"

"No. Err…well, I guess maybe." Minato's response had hints of fondness and exasperation engrained in it. That level of maturity was eerily reminiscent of a younger Itachi, though Mikoto suspected the Senju child had surpassed even her son with his insight. Yet another notion she definitely could not share with Fugaku. "Naruto *did* hog the blankets and Shisui was just fine but...well."

"Well?" She knew from experience that a child trailing off midsentence usually lead to nowhere good. Putting that knowledge to good use, Mikoto tapped the back of Minato's head with the brush and clucked with her tongue. "What happened?"

"Not long after you tucked us in, Sasuke showed up and

insisted that he needed to sleep with us since Shisui was probably up to something." Mikoto's lip quivered slightly and she resumed brushing the hair earning a pleased purr from the Senju in return. “Sasuke kept trying to steal my pillow.”

"Why did he believe Shisui was up to something?" Mikoto bit back a bark of laughter and pretended not to see her boys peeking at her from around the corner.

"He just wants to be included." Minato purred a reply with a content sigh. "Not sure why Itachi ended up with us, but five in a bed is a crowd. You can barely move and Shisui snores when he can’t roll."

"I see." Mikoto bit her lip, resolving to quietly make some adjustments to the rooms and explain the situation to Fugaku later--perhaps in a few weeks if she could divert his attention for that length of time. She loved her husband. Truly, Mikoto did, but Fugaku was also one that did not handle change very well. Perhaps it was a syndrome that afflicted the majority of the male population, who was to say?

Over the indignant squawking from the hallway, Itachi entered the room in navy Uchiha attire adjusting the tape around his wrists with a blank look. Mikoto had noticed her eldest had taken to smiling more since their house had taken to resembling a zoo, but beneath the rare flickers of joy, was the worrisome mind of her prodigy.

Mikoto knew fussing over Itachi would only push her son away, but she felt rather helpless to bridge the gap that seemed to have always been there. Itachi's icy exterior thawed only for the youngsters; before it had only been for Sasuke, but she recognized the attachment her eldest felt for Naruto and even the Senju boy. What Mikoto was truly unsure of was whether or not Itachi comprehended the depth of affection he felt for the children. Secretly, she suspected her eldest remained oblivious despite his obvious intelligence.

"Good morning." Minato mumbled a greeting with none of his usual grace.

"Minato." Itachi walked past the two of them and made to exit the house. "Keep Naruto and Sasuke out of trouble."

"Hey!" Naruto shouted from his not-so-well-hidden-spot directly outside the room. "Itachi-nii!"

"Nii-san!" Her little Sasuke's feathers ruffled as he appeared in the entryway looking conflicted. "Where are you going?"

Itachi paused and glanced over his shoulder with a solemn look before padding back toward his little brother. The expected forehead tap had Sasuke scrambling backward and Naruto bent over busting a gut—until he received his own poke.

“Itachi-nii!” The brothers groaned at the eldest in unison and Mikoto watched her eldest smirk for a moment.

"Team training this morning?" She asked gently. It seemed a bit unusual since Itachi's sensei rarely had them meeting before ten and it was barely eight.

"Mitshiro-sensei has a mission." ANBU level no doubt, Mikoto accepted the comment with a nod and even Minato had perked up somewhat from his hair trance. "I'm meeting for a taijutsu spar with Maito Gai."

"Have fun!" Minato chirped while Mikoto had frozen in shock.

Maito Gai was infamous throughout Konohagakure for his lousy taste in clothing, even worse hair styling habits, and his prowess as the village's premier taijutsu expert. In some respects, it was a boon to Itachi to be able to train under a master of his art that even her clan could not begin to match in hand to hand combat. On the other hand, Mikoto was still and Uchiha and her son would lead the clan and their village one day.

"Learn anything the man is willing to teach you. He has no equal in our village for taijutsu even among our clan's most skilled shinobi." Sasuke and Naruto had both made a gurgle of shock, though Minato remained quiet under her reflexive motions. Mikoto held her son's gaze with an iron vise while she made her demand. "If you show improvement in your abilities, the boys and I will delay your father discovering this association too soon." Naruto looked ecstatic that he was being included in a bit of subterfuge while Sasuke looked dismayed—likely because the boy craved Fugaku’s affection like nothing else. "That being said, there is a condition I require of you if you intend to continue associating with Maito-san."

"What is your restriction, Okaa-san?" It seemed her son was resorting to a more respectful form of address in order to fish for more information; Mikoto felt almost disappointed by how transparent that

tactic was. In any event, she was not about to be fooled by such a simple deception even if her foolish husband would likely have been soothed by such an obvious ruse.

"You will *not* mimic Maito-san in appearance or attire. Challenge this and I swear to allow Naruto, Sasuke, and Minato free reign to make your life hell until I feel you've earned a lesson." Itachi's jaw had slackened somewhat and her composed, prodigal son seemed at a loss of words. Mikoto grinned unpleasantly. "Do we have an understanding, Itachi?"

"You have my word." Itachi shifted uneasily under her gaze and she felt cheered that she had managed to penetrate her prodigy's thick skull. "I'll be home later."

"Such a good boy." Mikoto murmured before looking back at the pair standing in the doorway. "You two better go get changed. We're heading to the Hyuuga Compound soon."

"Ugh." Naruto whined from the doorway with an oversized scowl that reminded Mikoto of Kushina when she was about to verbally eviscerate someone. "I hope that jerk isn't there."

To Mikoto's exasperation, Sasuke mirrored Naruto's distasteful facial expression with a 'hn' to add just a bit of Uchiha flair. Those boys were certainly going to add to the occasional greys that Mikoto plucked increasingly often.

"Naruto, Neji is not a teme. He's just older and the Hyuuga…" Minato flailed a bit and snuck a look her direction. Mikoto merely folded her arms and raised a brow pointedly and the silver haired boy hastily made a selection. "They Hyuuga Clan seems to be a bit on the rigid, formal spectrum."

"He just probably has a stick up his— "

"Naruto-chan." Mikoto smiled dangerously. "Do we need to have that conversation about manners again?"

"Ack! No Kaa-chan!" The blonde zipped out of the room like his ass was on fire and Mikoto laughed again to herself, not minding that it sounded almost croaky in her chest. Naruto was certainly on to something in regards to the stuffy Hyuuga, but she would curb his need to publically point out those flaws if it was the last thing she did.

No doubt today's 'playdate' would have at least some

sparring involved. Naruto had loudly announced to Hiashi that his heir had done ‘training’ exercises as a group the last time Hinata had come to the Uchiha District. Naturally, Mikoto suspected the Hyuuga Clan head would make an attempt to prove they were the superior teachers. After all, it’s what Fugaku would have done. Men really were predictable when Clan anything was at stake.

Mikoto produced a leather band and carefully began pulling the silver hair into a high tail. "This will help keep it out of your face for now."

"Thank you, Mikoto-sama." The small boy thanks her politely and she patted his cheek fondly.

"You ought to get your sandals on too." She shooed him in the direction of the door and felt thankful that at least one of the boys was obedient. Sasuke was typically well-behaved, but Naruto had been rubbing off on him lately.

"Just like you rubbed off on me." Mikoto spoke aloud as she stared out the window searching for a redhead that would never appear. "You used to drive my father crazy."

Mikoto strode toward the front of the house where Sasuke and Minato were dutifully getting ready to leave. After slipping into her own sandals, she took a quick look, in the conveniently placed mirror, to make certain her appearance reflected the perfection her clan was famous for.

"Come on, Naruto!" Sasuke put his hands together over his mouth and hollered down the hallway. "We're going to be late getting to Hinata's place!"

“I’m coming! I’m just trying to find my coat!” Naruto screeched and there was a loud crash that had Mikoto counting backward from ten in her head.

“Moron! I told you I grabbed yours already!” Sasuke growled, shaking the offending garment in the direction of Naruto’s voice before balling it up and chucking it just as a blonde careened around the corner and into the room. Some of the pictures on the wall rattling dangerously when he skidded to a halt only to be snatched into the air by an already edgy Mikoto.

“Gah!”

"Sasuke! Naruto!" Mikoto’s voice dropped a decibel and

Sasuke shrank back appropriately until he was almost using Minato as a human shield. The Uchiha matriarch's lip twitched and she lifted the blonde that was quivering in fright. "No shouting in the house. Okay?"

"Ehehe hi, kaa-chan!" The blonde mustered his most charming smile and batted his eyes almost convincingly enough to wiggle out of any trouble. It was fortunate that Mikoto was an Uchiha mother and unmoved by such cuteness.

"And Naruto-chan." Mikoto shook the blonde causing him to yelp and flail about futilely. "No running in the house!"

"Sorry kaa-chan!" There was a tremor of emotion in the boy's mouth and instantly she set the blonde down and bent over to brush an affectionate kiss over the blonde's forehead. Like magic, her adopted son's face lit up and regained his boisterous personality.

"Alright! Let's go see Hinata-chan!" Naruto cheered.

"Just a moment." She put her hands on her hips, delighting in how the adorable trio froze and stared at her nervously. Deliberately slow, she raised a hand and extended her index finger toward the pair of orange sandals neatly sitting next to the doorway.

"Oh yeah! My sandals!" Naruto dropped to his bum reached for the eyesores that she was already regretted allowing him to buy. What had she been thinking?

"I think you boys are going to have fun today." She opted for positivity.

"Yeah, I guess." Naruto scratched his cheek, tugging on one garishly orange sandal, and paused with a pinched look that hardly boded well. "Say Minato." They waited ominously for Minato to make an appropriate noise. "Is that masked guy really your aniki, Minato-chan? Because he's kinda creepy and doesn't seem anything like you."

Oh, Naruto-chan…why oh why must you bring up such topics at such inopportune times?

"Hn." Sasuke offered from the side, clearly displeased in some form or another.

Neither of Minato's friends had taken to Hatake Kakashi very well, but the Uchiha Clan itself was *still* sulking over the donated Sharingan incident, which may have contributed to that negative outlook.

Mikoto suspected the true source of disapproval from the copy-nin's unannounced visits that resulted in their friend vanishing for the greater part of the day. This had occurred twice so far and apparently her boys were overprotective to the point of being homicidal because Kakashi had only barely avoided a kunai to the abdomen from Sasuke after a well-timed glitter bomb from her Naruto. Needless to say, Fugaku had not been informed and it had taken a lot of frantic effort to clean up the sparkles before he got home that night.

"You don't think Kakashi and I are alike?" Mikoto thought the Senju sounded more amused than upset, her theory proven correct when the scarlet eyed boy's eyes rolled slightly when Sasuke and Naruto were not looking.

"He wears a mask! And Shisui said he reads yucky stuff about adults kissing and stuff. Ugh!" Naruto gagged animatedly and Sasuke's nose wrinkled slightly.

Oh dear. Just wait until those two hit puberty. Mikoto felt a keen sense of dread fill her belly. Oh dear…her children were going to be a nightmare on the dating scene. That arranged marriage idea that the Clan had recently done away with was starting to look mighty keen.

"I would say that Kakashi-nii and I are no different than Itachi and Sasuke." Naruto froze like a trapped rabbit, Sasuke seemed almost hurt if not mildly offended, but Mikoto was holding her breath. She could not specifically explain why, but she was incredibly interested in hearing the outcome of this little discussion. "I say that because Sasuke has a more extroverted personality compared to his brother. Sasuke is more adventurous and seems to thrive on interactions with others and outside stimuli. Itachi seems perfectly content to read and would likely remain someone that does not engage with others if not for Shisui's intervention. Of course, based on our interactions, I think Sasuke will probably be a different sort of shinobi than his brother."

Mikoto was rather dumbfounded and she became aware of Sasuke's annoyance vanishing only to be replaced by intense interest.

"What do you say that, Minato-chan?" Naruto asked the question that was lingering on all of their minds.

"Well, Itachi uses mostly, genjutsu right? That means he is probably a support role." Mikoto felt herself sweating as the Senju boy wrapped up a rather brief but precise analysis. "Sasuke and Naruto will have a lot in common on the field." Both boys shot each other dubious looks.

“Both of them will probably be highly involved combatants that will get in close range, while executing heavy ninjutsu combinations. Of course, I could see them both using swords even if their techniques are entirely different.”

"Hell yeah! Sasuke and I are gonna be awesome together, dattebayo!" Naruto tossed his leftover sandal into the air with a cheer.

"Sasuke is one of my best friends." Tobirama’s heir stated with such unreserved matter-of-factness that Mikoto was caught off-guard. Such statements seemed so simple, but were costly and precious. And yet, she watched her son’s face light up with pleasure and all previous hurts vanish without a trace. "Just like you are, Naruto. Of course I'd notice what makes you guys special."

Mikoto’s throat sealed and she swiftly wiped away stray tears before one of the boys noticed her action.

"You're important to me too, Minato!" Mikoto watched Naruto wrap himself like an octopus around a flustered looking Senju that was desperately clawing at the arm around his neck. A moment later, Sasuke rescued Minato from Naruto's clutches only to wrestle the blonde right back to the ground.

Idly she felt regret about the less than impeccable appearances in front of the Hyuuga, but Minato was laughing, Sasuke was growling, and Naruto was screaming a protest. And an orange sandal had somehow disappeared in the ensuing chaos.

Perhaps there was something to that will of fire you preached, Hashirama-sama. Madara lost himself to grief before that dream was realized…but my son might have learned. Even though the repercussions may drive me nuts. I could really use a drink.

"What was that about teme?" The blonde jammed his elbow into Sasuke's gut.

"Minato was turning blue, dobe!" Sasuke snarled, but Minato saw the spark of excitement in his eyes when the Uchiha flipped them over and tugged the blonde's arms behind his back.

"Was not!" Naruto squirmed desperately. “Get off of me you, pervert!”

"Who are you calling a pervert?” Sasuke snapped back, but her son had already scrambled backward with a disgusted look on his

face.

Mikoto spared a second to wonder where they were learning all these terms and shook her head with a groan. Gripping Minato's shoulder, she steered the unresisting child around her sons and outside.

Sometimes the best course of action was inaction.

"I guess it's just going to be you and me, Minato-kun." Mikoto murmured as she ushered him down the lane of the Uchiha district. A pair of stray cats scattered out of the way of their footsteps and the occasional line of birdsong warbled in the background.

"I don't mind." The red-eyed boy skipped a few steps and smirked over his shoulder impishly.

Mikoto fought a grin at the crash, bang, and shouting that occurred behind them. There was a pair of curses that would have made a lesser woman blush but Mikoto resolutely continued walking, only waving a greeting to various Clan members and vowing to wash Naruto-chan’s mouth out with soap at the end of the day.

"Wait!" Naruto cried, darting to catch up with them and snagging one of her hands and squeezing it. "Made it!"

So much for being a big, tough kunoichi; the gesture warmed Mikoto and she gave the sweaty hand a squeeze in return. They had not been together for long, but she really had fallen in love with her son.

"They were like ten feet away, dobe." Sasuke gasped from his place next to Minato where he was pretending not to be completely out of breath.

"Whatever!" Naruto proved his maturity and stuck his tongue out at Sasuke.

"That's enough." Mikoto decisively ended the debate and they walked in silence aside from occasional greetings with fellow clansmen. Soon enough they were walking down one of the main thoroughfares that was already crawling with civilians. It started with a few turned heads that morphed into perplexed frowns after they stared from Mikoto to each of the children in turn. Some of the older generation zeroed in on Minato's face before their faces scrunched up and a few hands went to their mouths in reverent gestures she could

tell made the Senju child uncomfortable. Those that noticed her blonde son had backed away and were muttering angrily. And finally, those that had noticed what they perceived to be Konoha royalty in the company of the village pariah looked almost threatening and began spreading the verbal poison like wildfire.

Sasuke did not have the immediate genius of his brother, but her son had a natural intelligence of his own. Mikoto gestured with her free hand and Sasuke instantly placed himself on Minato's side in a flanking gesture that put the Senju between Naruto and himself. Mikoto had practically smashed Naruto into her side and was glaring at anyone who looked ready to approach and say anything about the jinchuuriki's presence.

Sasuke growled. Mikoto was no natural sensor, but she could sense her son's limited chakra supply flickering as a result of an unbalanced emotional state. "What is wrong with them?"

"They're always like this." Naruto's bravado had slipped and he seemed so very young and Mikoto pressed the blonde closer to her wishing she could shield him from this unwarranted cruelty.

"It's disgusting." The venom coming from the gentle, silver haired boy was shocking but even more so was the staggering weight of the Senju's disapproval. The man had been dead long before she was born, but Mikoto had no trouble believing the child was Tobirama's heir upon seeing the cold conviction demonstrated by the small child.

"Naruto, did you prank them or something?" Sasuke looked desperate to understand. "I don't see how you could have pranked them all though…"

"He has not done anything." Mikoto infused more than a small measure of harsh disgust into her voice, smiling with no small amount of satisfaction when the scandalized civilians recoiled in shock. "Civilians are just too ignorant of what they can't possibly understand."

The dirty looks multiplied in intensity but Mikoto was wearing the haughty persona of a typical Uchiha and she guided them through the street with a watchful eye.

"Can't we just arrest them?" Sasuke groused, sounding incredibly serious. "Tou-san could arrest them. I know he could!"

"If only it were that simple." There was a surprising spike of

legitimate killing intent from the silver haired child, directed toward a cluster of civilians that fled like the cowards they were; the intent subsided almost instantly and Minato's scarlet eyes were downcast and his shoulders slumped.

"Minato-kun is quite correct I'm afraid." The itch to reach for a durable spool of ninja wire and a pair of shuriken was unbearably tempting at this point. Her oxygen intake felt more than a little constrained and it was difficult to relax enough to plaster on a confident mask. "A person's behavior might be deplorable, but there is little we can do about it. We're just going to have to show them that they're wrong."

"I'm sorry, kaa-san." Naruto apologized into the fabric of her pants and that was nearly the straw that broke her resolve.

"Don't you ever apologize for them, Naruto-kun." Her words were harsher than she intended, but it was almost too much just to hold it together. More for her own benefit, Mikoto knelt and scooped up the jinchuuriki and pressed his face into her chest and continued to stare down anyone that looked their way for too long. "You've done nothing wrong."

If Fugaku was foolish enough to criticize her 'breach in decorum,' she would just have to break his nose again. Sooner or later, the lesson would stick.

They had nearly reached the Hyuuga Compound, Naruto had insisted on walking again and had joined Sasuke in the Club for Brooding Scowls, when a voice that sounded vaguely familiar called out to her.

"Mikoto-san!" The familiarity was unexpected and derailed any chance of looking appropriately disinterested.

The pinch-faced brunette, Nara Shikaku's wife, Yoshino, was crossing the road from a teahouse with a reluctant child in tow that was dragging his feet through the dirt and actually leaving a small trail of ruts behind him.

"Nara-san." Mikoto greeted the other woman with interest. Prior to the recent Akimichi barbecue, she had never interacted much with the other woman; at the barbecue, Mikoto had actually enjoyed the taciturn woman's company. Yoshino had been like a breath of fresh air and had been dismissive of any attempts at formalities and had treated Mikoto like a real person and not just the prominent wife

of Uchiha Fugaku. Mikoto had not had any real friendships since Kushina died, but she could definitely see potential for something not limited by petty social machinations. She had enjoyed it more than she was comfortable admitting.

"None of that formal stuff." Shikaku's wife waved her hand imperiously and gave the slouching boy a thoroughly aggressive shaking that caused the boy's teeth to rattle in his head. "Call me Yoshino. Nara-san makes me feel like I'm ready for the wrinkles that my son seems determined to give me!"

"Very, well Yoshino-san." Mikoto placed a hand on her boy's shoulder and urged them toward the sluggish Nara heir. "It's nice to see you again to Shikamaru-kun."

"Yo, Shikamaru!" Naruto barrelled into the Nara boy's space and nearly knocked the boy sprawling. "Haven't seen you since the party! Would you and Chouji like to hang out with us sometime? He was a lot of fun and he almost ate more dessert than I did! I need to have a ramen eating contest with him!"

"You're too loud." The boy scratched the back of his head, while scowling up at the sky aimlessly. "But as long as you don't do something troublesome, I suppose that would be okay."

"Right on!" Mikoto watched despairingly as Naruto shot his fist into the air for an instant before flapping his arms like a chicken and bouncing in place. "Eating contest with Chouji!"

"Not to worry." Mikoto's little Senju wandered up and placed a placating palm almost apologetically on Naruto's shoulder. "We'll keep an eye on him, Shikamaru-kun."

"Yep." Sasuke smirked mischievously.

"That's right!" Naruto chirped before his face turned a violently shade of red and he rounded on Sasuke. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, you bastard?!"

"That you're an idiot and need us to watch you." Sasuke deadpanned.

Mikoto rolled her shoulders with a practiced sigh and Yoshino rolled her eyes and stepped a few paces back where they could converse out of range of the quarreling boys.

“You have your hands full.” Yoshino commented dryly and deposited a shopping basket laden with produce next to her. “I’d wager heavily that your normal routine is nonexistent at this point.”

“Is it that obvious?”

Yoshino snorted, crossed her arms, and gestured vaguely at the boys who had settled into a discussion with Minato standing between Sasuke and Shikamaru while Naruto stood front and centre regaling the trio with some tale.

“Uzumaki Naruto is a handful.” Mikoto stiffened, only to relax in the next moment when she noticed the fond wistfulness playing at the corner of Yoshino’s mouth. “Don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against the boy. He may look like his father, but that child is one-hundred percent Uzumaki Kushina’s son. And I’m sure you understand better than most how busy of a woman you’re going to be for the next decade.”

“You know?” Mikoto’s jaw dropped slightly and she made a prompting motion with her hand. That sort of information was beyond classified to anyone and everyone. She only knew because Kushina had been her best friend.

“Of course.” Yoshino admitted, a single callused finger pointing casually in Naruto’s direction. “You and I graduated from separate classes and we travelled in different social circles. And again, our postings in the war were different, but almost everyone heard or saw Uzumaki Kushina and her teammates around the village. Of course, Shikaku worked closely with the Yondaime and became friends with the man; that alone provided enough pieces of the puzzle that the rest was obvious.”

Again, Mikoto is struck by how open the Nara matriarch is. Perhaps honesty was simply part of how they manipulated the situation. If so, the Uchiha was afraid it was already working.

“The reputation of the Nara Clan is well deserved.” Mikoto observed dryly.

“We all have our talents.” Yoshino surprised her again with the gentle deflection of praise. “I could spend the afternoon trading pretty words that are both true and tedious. So I’ll get right to the point and tell you why I stopped you.”

“I’ve enjoyed speaking with you so please do not offer any

apology." It was a piece of the truth anyway.

"All the same." Yoshino reached down to regather her basket of produce into her arms. "My family is hosting a dinner this Saturday for the Clan Heads and their families. It's a casual gathering and you hardly need to bring anything. But we would very much hope you and your family can come."

Mikoto again felt like she was ill-prepared for the generous offer and stared in shock for a few moments before nodding slowly.

"Your offer is deeply appreciated." Mikoto infused her voice with genuine sentiment. "We will be there and I will bring something just the same. I like to cook so the effort is no trouble."

"If you want to, I'm not about to turn down free labor." Yoshino smirked and Mikoto wondered if that had been the trap all along. "And Mikoto-san?"

"Yes?"

"I'm aware that Kushina-san was your best friend, but that hardly means you need to coop yourself up in the compound like an old retiree." Mikoto gaped at the implied insult and had lost the words to formulate a reply. "I hereby invite you to a gathering of Clan wives. We meet every Thursday in the evening to complain about our useless husbands, play games, and have a little fun. You should come."

"I'll have to think on it." Mikoto plastered on a flustered smile, unable to formulate anything more as a comeback.

"Now, now." Yoshino waggled a finger in front of her face and adopted a dangerous leer that made Mikoto wonder how the Nara never had adopted a reputation for being frightening. "Don't let Hiashi rub off on you. That man needs a good woman to beat some sense into him for the sake of the Konoha populace. If you like, I'd be happy to walk with you. I need to invite that troublesome individual anyway."

"How did you know?" Her eyes widened.

"It's obvious." Yoshino snorted but Mikoto detected the humor emanating from the other woman. "But if you come to one of our ladies' nights…perhaps I'll fill you in."

"I just might." Mikoto spat back, feeling rebellious and feeling challenged all at once. "And I would hardly mind the

company.

“Good to hear.” Yoshino sounded approving and she started toward the boys again. “I think you and I are going to get along just fine, Mikoto-san. Shall we?”

Yoshino gestured to the children and Mikoto nodded slightly, still caught in a fog of disbelief. What had just happened? It seemed a bit too unbelievable, but perhaps she had made a friend again. How odd…how nice.

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“Do they always bicker like a married couple?” Shikamaru griped in a muffled murmur that Minato suspected was deliberately toned down so that only the Senju would catch it. Thankfully Sasuke was too busy gagging Naruto with a very aggressive headlock and did not appear to have noticed Shikamaru’s commentary.

“Sasuke may appear to be irritated, but if he was actually annoyed he could easily put a stop to Naruto’s antics.” Minato rattled off his observations that the Nara was soaking up like a sponge. “He would never admit it, but Sasuke enjoys his banter with Naruto. Naruto is creative, funny, and has a good heart. In a lot of ways, they are complementary friends. So don’t be deceived by appearances. With those two, you’re going to have to look underneath the underneath.”

The Nara tipped his head in acknowledge but did not otherwise response. A pensive Nara was a contemplative Nara so Minato was inclined to count that as a win. A new life had not erased the fact that he actually enjoyed teaching and passing on tidbits of wisdom even if the delivery method was unconventional.

"Did you hold up your end of the bet?" Minato asked. Curiosity had a knack of getting the better of him; that had been true in his old life and was holding fast in this one as well.

"Yeah, yeah." Shikamaru grunted, falling into a slouch. "Except your bet has made my life all the more troublesome."

"Learning a technique reserved for a genin can only be an asset." Sasuke rejoined their conversation after settling his differences with Naruto. Once again, the Uchiha haughtiness emerged from hiding: "Otou-san has even started training us more seriously since we learned the technique."
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"Heck yeah!" Naruto bounced, not noticing the other boys eyeing him warily. "Shisui has been dodging my shuriken for days!"

Minato twitched and quickly raised a hand to hide a smile. Poor Shisui had become rather paranoid and had taken to replacing himself with nearby furniture anytime Naruto made sudden movements. Needless to say Fugaku had not been amused and had lectured the chunin extensively and threatened to make him pay for the damages. Naruto miraculously got out of trouble with a mere slap on the wrist and a ban on Ichiraku ramen for a week that had traumatized the blonde into submission.

"It's troublesome because now my kaa-san keeps pestering me to start training with the clan." Shikamaru remarked as he shot an uneasy glance toward his mother. “It’s not like I have to worry about graduating the Academy until I’m twelve anyway. But now I’m being nagged about training all day long.”

“Do you want to be weak?” Sasuke had zeroed in on Shikamaru like one a cat ready to devour a mouse. Minato sighed and resigned himself to several future conversations with Sasuke on how not to treat your friends. It would be an uphill battle persuading his friend to his line of thinking, but the pay-off would be substantial. And someday Sasuke might even thank him for it.

“I think Shikamaru is just concerned about spending time with his friends and enjoying life before graduation, Sasuke-kun.” Rather than galvanized by the gentle chiding, Minato was relieved to see that Sasuke merely looked thoughtful. “Once we become shinobi, our lives are dictated by the Hokage and what Konoha requires of us. This means our free time is limited. And not everyone likes to train for fun like we do.”

"You could come train with us sometime. Training with friends is way more fun than hanging out alone." Naruto offered readily, not seeming to notice how his natural charisma seemed to draw the Nara in. “And you could bring Chouji! He’s a lot of fun! And afterward we can play ninja and have snacks.”

"I guess that would be alright." Sasuke grunted. "Just don't bring the Yamanaka girl. She was--"

"Too troublesome?" Shikamaru asked with his hands shoved into his pockets.

"Too loud." Sasuke spat, mouth wrinkling up as if he had

tasted something particularly sour. "I never thought someone could be louder than Naruto-" A garbled protest. "-and more annoying than my cousin Shisui."

"I just said that Ino was too troublesome." Shikamaru's gaze drifted upward until his chin was nearly vertical as he stared up at the sky. "But I still think she should come. She'll settle down once she gets to know everyone."

"Sasuke, I don't think she was quite that bad." Minato winced at the rather harsh comparison. Inoichi had been quite the extroverted personality type and he had turned out to be an exceptional shinobi. Minato suspected that all Ino needed was a time and experience. "And besides, Ino seemed to get along pretty well with Hinata."

Ebony eyes trained on him and Minato lifted his eyes and gave the ebony haired boy a pouting, eye pleading glance. Sasuke seemed taken aback for a moment, but a moment later threw his arms up in surrender and smiled crookedly.

“Fine. I guess if she’s Hinata’s friend, it’s fine.” Sasuke seemed more playful and even cracked a smile. “We’re vising her family today too.”

"Oh yeah!" Naruto spun in a circle and posed exaggeratedly. "We're going to see Hinata-chan! Why don't you walk with us Shikamaru?"

"That's a fine idea, Naruto-kun. Don't you think so, Shikamaru?" The Nara matriarch had a pleased smirk on her face and Shikamaru had blanched and was groaning into his hands.

"It would seem so." Mikoto was the picture of serene and Minato felt a rush of satisfaction at seeing how relaxed the Uchiha woman was next to the forceful Yoshino. It was an unusual pairing, but perhaps a strong personality like Kushina would be a boon to the Uchiha matriarch.

"This is such a drag." The Nara boy moaned unconvincingly into his hands. “Can’t we just go home now? We’ve been out for an hour.”

“Only an hour?” Minato did not bother easing up on the sarcasm and felt satisfied when the Nara flinched slightly.

“An hour is a long time…or not?” Naruto’s face screwed up and Minato fell into a coughing fit while Mikoto muttered about adding additional material to Naruto’s sessions. Oh God…how far behind was his son?

"Stop complaining, Nara.” Sasuke shot out; it was rather evident to Minato that the Uchiha Clan as a whole found Nara laziness incomprehensible and were repeatedly baffled by what they perceived to be unusual behavior. “You’re starting to seem worse than that Yamanaka.”

“That’s a little harsh.” Minato twitched as Shikamaru rounded on Naruto with a voice infused with incredulity. “You can’t tell time?”

"I’m working on it!” Naruto grumbled defensively and Minato spied the blonde shooting Mikoto a desperate look.

“I’ll show you later.” Sasuke promised and Minato’s sense of reality was instantly shattered. On the Brightside, Mikoto looked almost as shocked by the boy’s offer.

“Thanks Sasuke!” Naruto returned and Minato automatically turned and trudged toward the Hyuuga compound.

He needed to get out of there before his head exploded.

“Wait for us!” Naruto called and the other three boys—Shikamaru included—caught up within seconds and began chatting cheerily as they walked the last few blocks to their destination. A few tidbits worth remembering were shared and filed away for later use. Just like his father, Chouji was bribable with food but potato chips were a slam dunk. Minato had a few ideas about that if the other boy did come train with them. And apparently the Inuzuka Clan Head had two children, but the youngest was probably even more of a handful than Naruto. Yep, a little rivalry was certainly a healthy thing and that certainly created some possibilities.

Any advantage he could bring to the table to get this generation ready for what was to come…he owed it to them. If a lesson could save their lives or make a difference in the war to come than Minato had no choice. Come hell or high water, he would get these children prepared. Certainly there would be a bit of a biased focus on Naruto and Sasuke but he would do what he could for the others too.

The Hyuuga Clan grounds had high walls and a guard visibly standing at attention just beyond the gate. The Hyuuga Clan seemed strangely obsessed with privacy and tradition considering their dojutsu practically made the lot of them voyeurs. Minato had spent many uncomfortable afternoons listening to Jiraiya-sensei complain ferociously about his misfortune not to be born with the all-seeing eyes of the Hyuuga Clan.

Not surprisingly for a Clan with all-seeing eyes, the Clan Compound did not immediately appear to have guards in attendance. Though Minato naturally sensed the four signatures sporadically placed about the manicured front entrance. Two in the parallel entrance trees that still bore traces of the Shodai's chakra from when the Hokage grew them to welcome them to Konoha. The other two concealed alongside the stone wall.

"Do they measure the grass?" Shikamaru gestured to the perfectly manicured greenery that even Minato could admit had perfection that rivalled the Daimyo's prized gardens. It certainly must seem out of place in a village that trained shinobi in arts of destruction rather than creation.

"Shikamaru!" A warning growl from behind and even Minato tensed up in fear. An angry, motivated Nara was a force of nature not to be tampered with.

"Yeah the whole Compound is like that." Naruto nodded agreeably. "I think the Hyuuga are probably gardening ninja."

"I don't think that's an actual thing." Minato spotted some affronted tree limbs rustling tellingly and rushed to divert Naruto. "let's just do our best to have a good time today. It's a bummer that Shikamaru-kun can't come with us though."

"Yeah." Naruto seemed almost sounded sad while Shikamaru scoffed. "leave me out of this."

Thankfully Hyuuga Hiashi appeared at the entrance garbed in a rich, white kimono and derailed any further bickering between his friends. No doubt someone alerted the Clan Head that an additional visitor had arrived and had taken upon himself to greet them personally.

"Nara-san, I did not anticipate your arrival. I hope you were not delayed by any unsavory types." The man's attention lingered over the Uchiha matriarch for a telling moment. Minato did not appreciate for one second the underhanded barbs that Hiashi was passing out in an

effort to look superior. His experience as a Kage being a boon in this situation, the Senju rapidly placed a restraining arm on Naruto's shoulder while noting Shikamaru was mirroring his action on the other side. "Uchiha-san, I was beginning to become concerned when you did not arrive on time. You'll have to forgive me for the absence of tea. I'm afraid the servants are preparing a fresh pot."

Minato was certain that Hiashi could have given any four-year old a run for the money on a lesson in pettiness. Fortunately, Yoshino interceded before someone else managed to muck things up.

"Tch, quit behaving so troublesome, Hiashi." Minato heard nearly identical splutters from the trees above as Yoshino crossed to where the Hyuuga Clan Head was standing; Hiashi balked and took step backward into a defensive position that screamed indignant. "The Hyuuga and the Uchiha Clan both have amazing dojutsu that gives you an edge. Tell us something we haven't known for the last century! Now grow up or so help me I'll sic Tsume on you and we both *know* how well that will go."

Minato wished for a camera to capture this moment forever because Mikoto looked stunned and Hiashi wore a combination of fury and embarrassment on his rapidly reddening cheeks.

"Your kaa-san is awesome, Shikamaru." Naruto murmured quietly but the Senju could already see hero-worship taking root in his friend.

Fate appeared to want to trump the already tense situation because Hyuuga Hizashi appeared behind his brother in a charcoal colored yukata that appeared to almost be…dressed down. At his heels were Neji, Hinata, and Aburame Shino trailing like puppies. Though it would have been impossible to miss the way the Hyuuga heiress lit up and waved eagerly to Mikoto and her friends.

"Have a good time, tou-san." Little Neji offered shyly while Shino and Hinata mirrored his sentiments.

"Greetings, Nara-san, Uchiha-sama." Hizashi smiled slightly and turned to Hiashi—obviously unaware or uncaring of how tense that atmosphere was. "Onii-sama, I'm going to leave Neji and Shino-kun under your supervision since you will be supervising Hinata-sama's friends."

It was clear to Minato that Hiashi very much *wanted* to deny the request but was unwilling to make a scene in such a public place with so many important witnesses in the vicinity. And Mikoto and Yoshino

looked remarkably smug with almost leering smirks affixed to their face as they watched Hiashi being bulldozed publically with no recourse but to accept it.

“I have no objection.” Clearly he did, but the man was doing his best to retain his composure. “May I ask what business is taking you outside the compound today?”

“Of course, onii-sama,” Hizashi’s voice had softened a decibel, though Minato could have sworn there was a bit of glee clouding Hizashi’s otherwise flawless performance. “In fact, I’m meeting Uchiha Maiko for a lunch. Meeting her at the Clan gathering was a stroke of good fortune.”

“You’re meeting with an Uchiha?” Hiashi looked like he had been struck with a particularly impairing ration jutsu because his mouth open and closed once or twice before he re-established his blank façade.

“No, onii-sama.” Hizashi corrected almost gently as he adjusted the pristine folds of his own kimono. “I’m meeting with a woman whose company I found enjoyable. Certainly you can appreciate the value of good companionship?”

“I hope she pleases you, father.” Neji said with a sweet innocence about him, while Minato felt his entire face burn red.

“If our meeting is agreeable, I may introduce you to her another time.” Hizashi offered calmly and gave his son an affectionate pat on the back that had the boy glowing with happiness. “Enjoy your time with Shino-kun, Neji.”

“I will, tou-san.”

Minato watched Hizashi pass his twin and pause before the matriarchs.

“I expect you will treat my Clanswoman with appropriate respect, Hizashi-sama” Mikoto’s tone was completely serious but the smirk she shot Hiashi was riddled with glee.

“You have my word, Uchiha-sama.” Hizashi bowed to the woman and inclined his head to his purple-faced twin. The Hyuuga branch member paused once and surveyed the group of children. “Please enjoy yourselves. My brother is an excellent host and will ensure you have a wonderful time. Nara-san, it’s always a pleasure to see you.”

“Likewise, Hizashi-kun.” Yoshino replied familiarly, going so far as to wink boldly at the stoic man. “Be sure to accompany your brother to our Clan residence this weekend. And feel free to bring a companion, if you like.”

A pink faced Hizashi waved and vanished from the Compound grounds.

Hiashi’s expression was positively frosty as his brother made a hasty retreat.

“Shikamaru-kun, it was nice to see you.” The other boy waved with a look of pure understanding and Minato gripped both boys and started ushering them toward the door and past Hyuuga Hiashi. Impolite or not, the other man was about to explode and none of them wanted to be around when that happened. “Hinata-chan, how about we go inside and get started.”

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Naruto had often wondered what having a family would be like. He used to spend hours gazing out the window of the orphanage and watch the lucky few walk away with their new families. The blonde had known better than to complain since he was fortunate to eat more than once a day. Still, he sometimes wondered about that queer look he saw on the faces when people laughed and smiled at one another.

Naruto might have gone crazy if the Sandaime had not rescued him from the isolation of that locked bedroom in the orphanage's attic. Even if people glared at him, Naruto had been able to explore the village itself. He had met Teuchi and his daughter that did not chase him away and even let him eat dinner at their stand. No, he realized how fortunate he was even if his heart longed for something more.

Then Minato had approached him. The other boy had reached out to *him* to ask him to play: it had been the best night of his life. The blonde had nervously waited for a parent to call the other boy away or for him to just leave on his own, but Minato stayed. They had dinner together and Naruto instantly felt giddy when he discovered the boy with the long hair had a situation like himself; maybe it was selfish, but he was secretly thrilled at the prospect that he might not have to face his days by himself anymore.
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Then Minato had somehow convinced *other* kids to play with them too. For a moment Naruto had felt apprehensive, but then he realized that Minato was like magic. The other children did not balk at Naruto's presence, if anything they were either indifferent or welcoming. Sure Sasuke was a grouch sometimes and needed to loosen up a bit, but he was still pretty fun. And Hinata's cheeks turned red like a tomato every other minute; but the weird looking girl was kind and surprised the blonde with her creativity. Best of all, the Uchiha Clan did not seem to share that animosity that everyone else seemed to have toward him.

Naruto hated to admit it, but the next day or so was a bit of a blur. Probably from the emotional shock of a family actually wanting him. Never in his wildest dreams did Uzumaki Naruto ever *dare* to imagine that someone might want him. Jiji visiting him and giving him a hug once in a while was already huge, but suddenly everything was different.

Naruto had two brothers now. Sasuke did not exactly seem thrilled, but he did not really complain either. Naruto pranked the crap out of Sasuke and loved watching the duck butt's eyes shoot flames in his direction. Itachi was not the fun type and seemed far too serious for Naruto's taste, but the older boy would ruffle his hair every now and then the stoic brother would smile at him ever so gently. It made Naruto think that maybe Itachi being boring was not so bad after all.

Parents were hard for Naruto to accept simply because he had never believed he would have any. Uchiha Fugaku was a stern character that lectured way too much for Naruto's liking; that and the blonde was not so sure that his new tou-san had been entirely on-board with this adoption thing. But Uzumaki Naruto never gave up and so he had wormed his way into the man's attentions until Naruto was absolutely positive that Fugaku was not as indifferent as he pretended to be. He had felt the other man's heart race after he picked him up on that strange night...Fugaku cared even if the man pretended otherwise.

Uchiha Mikoto was more incredible that Naruto's wildest dreams. There were hugs that left him feeling giddy and warm on the inside. There was learning how to read the characters that had, at first glance, seemed like an insurmountable barrier that he had not known how to conquer. There were baths, meals, and kisses. Uzumaki Naruto had thought he had known what love was, but the bubbling attachment that surpassed all of his previous experiences replaced his

old notions and the blonde instinctually connected the dots between the new roar of emotions and love.

In a short time, his precious people had expanded to include his family, friends, and Sandaime-jiji. Naruto felt these new people that had come into his life were as essential as breathing. Naruto still wanted to become the Hokage, but he wanted it so that he could protect these people with everything he had. If any of them vanished, Naruto was not sure he would survive that pain. Being alone had been hell, but to lose the people that saved him would be a new, harsher form of a hell that Naruto refused to discover.

And now…happiness was not such an alien subject. Happiness and the people that nourished that feeling…it was kind of amazing.

"Naruto-kun!" A glowing hand grazed his forearm and Naruto was jolted back to the present.

"Ack! How are you so fast?!" Naruto threw himself out of the way and nearly tripped over his own feet. Naruto's eyes narrowed and he somersaulted across the grass and hopped back to his feet.

Naruto placed his palms on his knees and panted lightly. Hinata was standing a few paces away looking only slightly dishevelled with flecks of grass clinging to her white kimono and her arms and legs in position to kick his ass right back into the grass.

"I'm sorry." Immediately Naruto felt bad when Hinata looked away and bit her lip while glancing toward where her dad--super prick if you asked Naruto--was speaking quietly with Mikoto.

"Don't be!" Naruto jumped forward, grabbed Hinata's shoulder, and gave his friend a hearty shake.

"I told you not to go easy on me!" Naruto smacked his chest and fell into the stance that Itachi-nii had showed him with tou-san. It still felt a bit weird, but they were quick to reassure him that he would become accustomed to the different poses.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Hinata was *still* looking at the ground. Naruto shook her again and his friend jerked to alertness and stared at him awkwardly.

"How am I supposed to get better if you go easy on me,

Hinata-chan?" Naruto grumbled, but let his hands fall to his sides in a scowl that would have made Sasuke proud.

"I... you're right." Hinata fell back into a ready stance. "Let's try again, Naruto-kun. And maybe..." Naruto frowned as Hinata swallowed harshly but her eyes looked more determined. "It would be best if you avoided looking at your feet. I notice you keep looking down and that will not only cause you to lose your balance, but it leaves me openings to attack you."

"Oh. That really makes a lot of sense!" Naruto felt dumb for not realizing something like that on his own. It seemed like common sense to him. "Let's try this again!"

Naruto and Hinata traded blows that Naruto felt all the way down to the bone. Naruto's lips quirked into a smile: he was already having a great time.

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"The Hyuuga Compound flower beds have an impressive number of beetles."

Minato pointed to the beetle with tiny yellow markings.

"Is that coloration normal, Shino-kun?"

The question was intended to draw out the solemn boy and Minato was pleased to see Shino lean forward a bit too quickly to be dismissed as anything but eager.

"You have a keen eye, Minato-kun." A pale finger reached out toward the creepy crawler and stopped just shy of tracing the scurrying insect. "That particular beetle is a sub-variety of a much rarer beetle known for their abilities to absorb chakra. While the coloration is exquisite, this particular insect would fare poorly in battle."

A dirt clod was flung into the flower bed where they were sitting and the Senju glowered at where Neji and Sasuke were engaging in a pissing match that was being passed off as a 'spar.' It was a simple result of Sasuke reacting to Neji's quip about the Hyuuga Clan's taijutsu superiority. Minato understood that the boy was just aping the same line of crap that the majority of the Hyuuga Clan was spouting, but he would have thought that Sasuke would be a bit more
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restrained: not a chance. To be fair, Minato was quite willing to assign the majority of blame to Hiashi who had egged the situation on after reinforcing Neji's snippy comment which escalated to where the two boys were attacking each other with the limited taijutsu they had both been taught. And of course, it appeared that Neji was winning, but Sasuke was giving him hell just the same.

“If you insist on continuing the illogical pursuit of determining which clan possesses a superior taijutsu ability with only a limited amount of training, keep your spar out of the way. You're disturbing the insects!" Minato detected the trace amounts of killing intent emanating from his Aburame companion. It was small now, but given time Minato knew the ability would be quite impressive in a few years.

Neji and Sasuke had both jumped when Shino addressed them and had appeared to have forgotten they were in the midst of a brawl.

"Sorry, Shino." Minato's brows shot up at the familiarity that Neji conveyed in that address. If the Aburame had managed to breakdown the icy Hyuuga mask so quickly...that was impressive and rather telling. "I will steer our spar in other directions. My apologies."

"Sorry about the dirt, Shino-kun. Minato." Sasuke apologized breathlessly; apparently Minato's friend seemed more focused on taking advantage of the precious reprieve by gulping in air and giving his small body a rest. "Are you two going to join us?"

Minato *almost* felt guilty for not instantly agreeing to the suggestion. No doubt Sasuke was fishing for an out to the spar...but Minato knew his friend would use the experience to grow even stronger.

"I'm content looking at the different insect subspecies for now." Minato smiled over the crestfallen look that Sasuke instantly buried beneath a weak grin. "Unless Shino has an objection, of course. Do *you* want to spar, Shino?"

"Your offer is a considerate one and I would not be averse to sparring after we conclude our discussion." Shino rocked back on his heels and adjusted the glasses that had slid down the bridge of his nose as he stared the Senju down. "Due to your own notable efforts in instructing me in chakra control, my parents have increased my training regimen by 33%. I would be interested in matching up

against you, though if the previous trend holds, I may not pose a significant challenge."

Sasuke had been lured back into a more typical spar with Neji and the pair both panted heavily while continuing to trade blows.

"Eating dirt is no fun at all." Minato translated the mess fondly while the Aburame nodded gravely. "But if you enjoy our spar later on, you should consider sparring with our other friends later on."

"Other friends?"

There was a pang of wistfulness disguised in that question that reminded Minato far too much of overly cheerful Naruto who hid his pain far too well.

"Of course." He kept it simple and matter of fact. This was an Aburame he was dealing with, after all.

"I have no qualms."

Naruto bellowed a war cry from across the courtyard and Minato watched him charge Hinata again only for the heiress to weave to the side and plant the blonde into the ground with a roundhouse kick.

"I think Naruto is losing." Minato remarked dryly.

"Your assessment seems to be supported by considerable evidence." Shino said blandly. "Perhaps he should concede."

"Never." Minato's thoughts travelled to that story that inspired the blonde's name. "Naruto is too gutsy to give up. It may seem foolish in the moment, but he will only become stronger over time. It may not be today or even tomorrow, but Naruto will come out on top."

Minato knew it was an impulsive decision to speak on Naruto's behalf. Still, it went against everything that comprised his personality to stand back and *not* defend Uzumaki Naruto. But if Minato could get a few other people to see Naruto as more than just a loudmouth nuisance...all the better.

It was quiet for a few minutes and they watched Sasuke viciously flipping Neji over in a rare moment of triumph that lasted three seconds before the older boy vaulted to his feet and tumbled the

Uchiha.

"You seem confident." Shino ventured cautiously and Minato felt a flicker of regret for being the cause of that unintended apprehension.

"I've seen more than a measure of his worth." Minato answered the unasked question. "I can't say more, but I'll tell you he is not a book to be judged by his cover."

"A lesson any shinobi should take under advisement." The Aburame remarked while losing some of the stiffness in his shoulders. "But I apologize if offense was given. I will take your observations into consideration and reserve judgment."

"Thank you, Shino-kun." Minato murmured softly. "I appreciate it more than you know."

The other boy merely nodded and Minato felt a desperate need to change the course of the discussion before it became too infused with melodrama.

"Shino-kun, are you at all familiar with the jutsu that causes transparency?" Minato asked, stretching his arm just so and managing to coax the insect with fluttering wings of purple, amber, and white onto his finger. Grinning triumphantly, he carefully turned toward his companion wearing tiny sunglasses who eagerly leaned forward to inspect the wing pattern.

It was subtle, but Shino shifted into his personal space and there was an echo of buzzing that died down almost immediately. Minato rubbed his hands together: palpable interest implied a much higher degree of success.

"The Aburame Clan does not practice a particularly diverse base of shinobi techniques. Like many Clans, I believe we prioritize the cohesive and essential knowledge of symbiotic abilities with the kikai bugs that inhabit our bodies."

Minato translated that to imply that Shino had not heard of the jutsu in question. Though he was far from oblivious to the minute tension that appeared in the other boy's movements after he had mentioned his kikaichu.

“I am certain that your parent’s may possess a more diverse base of connections that may lead you to the jutsu in question.”

Minato worded his response carefully and was rewarded when the quiet boy next to him nodded thoughtfully. “But my suggestion is based on the concept of adapting the jutsu to become biologically assimilated by your kikai. I imagine invisible bugs could be an asset to your combat style, right?”

“It would indeed be an idea with considerable merit.” The other boy commented but his attention turned to focus on Minato who felt a bit uncomfortable under the weighty scrutiny of a Clan that was comparable to the Nara’s intellect on a different scale.

“Something on my face?” Minato scrubbed a knuckle over his cheek, mindful of the dirt clinging to his fingers.

“You seem rather knowledgeable on a wide variety of topics that could be considered obscure.” The four-year old presented his argument in a quizzical, low tone that undoubtedly sounded far more mature for his age. Unconsciously Minato felt his brow line dampen and he wondered if perhaps he had made an error. “And you have not only withheld information, but have shared what you know communally. In a village that prizes secrets, you seem to have little care for hoarding information that may give you an advantage.”

“One person alone against a danger leaves little certainty in victory.” Minato’s mind raced, wondering if there was a way to swing this sort of situation to his advantage. Kikai bugs had a knack for discerning fluctuations in a person’s behavior. It was reasonable to conclude that Shino may not be privy to that information yet, but this was Shibi’s son and he was not about to place a sucker bet like another Senju he knew. “But a community or group together may stand against insurmountable odds and triumph. If I can make my friends stronger, it may very well save my life or the life of another.”

“Your argument is sound.” The Aburame seemed to conclude after a moment. “Thank you for sharing your insight about that jutsu. I will ask my father about it at a later date. May I ask where you learned of such a jutsu?”

Such a loaded question that Minato felt entirely uncomfortable answering even if Shino’s question appeared innocent on the surface. Clan children were on an entirely different level from that of civilian parentage. Insightful and capable of killing and words were definitely traps.

“The Hokage probably won’t let me give details.” Minato

rubbed his dirty fingers in the grass and carefully wove the truth while providing a trail of breadcrumbs that would lead to a different conclusion altogether. Mentioning a classified topic would prove invariably beneficial under this circumstance. “But I can tell you that where I came from, I saw a man use it many times. He told me that it was useful for spying.” And research, but he hardly needed to mention that little detail.

“Fascinating.” The Aburame stood and offered a hand up to Minato that he accepted with a gracious tip of his head that was returned with a solemn nod. “My Clan is often recruited for infiltration purposes. Such an ability could only be beneficial in such circumstances. I will be putting your idea to the test.”

“Let me know how it goes.” He gestures to a free area of grass. “How are you in taijutsu forms, Shino-kun.”

“I had only started the basics recently, but my association with Hyuuga Neji has made improvements in that area a necessity.” The Aburame replied monotonously.

“I can see why that would…” Minato winced as he heard Sasuke hit the ground again and knew Fugaku would be in a mood when he heard about it. “Shall we spar then, Shino-kun?”

“I will not hold back.” The Aburame droned a warning.

“Good to hear it.” Minato grinned. “If you did, I don’t think I would improve.”

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Mikoto had absolutely had it. Screw propriety. Screw the Uchiha manners. And damn the Hyuuga and their idiocy to hell. Mikoto sorely wished Yoshino had stayed after delivering an invitation to Hiashi that could have passed as an ultimatum to another get together.

“Hand her over!” Mikoto barked at the flustered branch nanny that had been fruitlessly attempting to calm Hiashi’s infant daughter for the past ten minutes while they pretended nothing was wrong and made pointless small talk.

All but ripping the infant from the stuttering woman’s arms, Mikoto lifted the burbling babe and pressed the small head onto her shoulder and started rubbing the infant’s back. Distantly she heard
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Hiashi dismissing the serving woman, but Mikoto blocked that out and focused her attention on the squirming body. Almost instantly, the struggling bundle relaxed to a few strained whimpers that rapidly turned into snuffling sounds. A tune on her lips and a sway in her lips, Mikoto listened to baby Hanabi fall to sleep in a matter of minutes with only light infant breaths tickling her skin.

"Thank you for caring for my daughter." Hiashi was standing next to her stiffly, almost awkwardly, and Mikoto felt an ounce of sympathy for the man for the first time in perhaps…ever.

"I like children." Mikoto admitted freely, while rubbing the infant's back. The children were all paired off in the yard and no one was crying so she counted that a success. "And your welcome…though I'm surprised you're allowing an Uchiha like me to touch her."

The bitterness in her voice was unintentional, but the effect was immediate. Hiashi looked like he had been slapped and looked rather unhappy. Mikoto did not care though. She was tired of petty little pretenses and was starting to think Yoshino had it right.

"If I have given offense— "

"Just stop." Mikoto paused to wrap the blanket more firmly around the baby before continuing the swaying motion. Thankfully, Hanabi barely stirred and continue to snooze on her shoulder. "Don't you just get tired of behaving like this? I don't know how the rivalry between our clans started since the only answers I hear come from bitter old men, but is it really worth trying to outdo each other all the time?"

Hiashi could have been made of stone beside her, but Mikoto was far from done.

"You and Fugaku are men cut from the same cloth." She continued, watching the man flinch back, but she did not care. Mikoto was on a roll and for the first time she was speaking her mind unhindered by what her clan might think. "Both of you are proud men that somehow feel you exist solely to further reputations of your clan. And both of you are so blinded by some petty need to look superior that both of you forget that we live in a community. Does any of it bring satisfaction? This is a silly contest on who has the greater visual prowess, but it's a pointless argument. We could compare the moon and the stars and yet never come up with an appropriate answer since both present very different functions. And I just wish all of us could

simply get along and realize how much better life could be if we work together. How much more would our reputation grow if we were linked than if we stand alone having pissing matches."

Mikoto trailed off and watched the six children gather into a loose circle. This has to be the source of her bitterness; adults caught up in senseless competition while the youngest of their number smile, learn, and grow stronger as a cohesive unit.

Mikoto had buried her head in the sand these past years and forgotten. She had notions many would call radical, some would call disruptive, and some would call change. But the hope of a nation is right in front of her she can almost taste it. Except most people praise the truth while secretly abhorring it. People are not keen on being confronted by what they don't want to hear. And again, Mikoto feels helplessness and uncertainty settle over her bones.

"I know that my opinions don't really matter." It is not an apology, but she refused to offer one that would reek of insincerity. "I just see potential constantly being wasted and no one musters the nerve to change things. I'm an Uchiha and I understand better than most how difficult my family can be…but that doesn't mean there isn't a better way."

Shino and Naruto have attached themselves to a tree and appear to be studying a bee hive from a respectful distance away. Hizashi's boy appears to be engaged in a quiet discussion with Minato whose ponytail is swishing lightly while performing cooldown stretches next to him. And Hinata is more or less ordering Sasuke around while the two set up the table with china cups for tea and fresh smelling cinnamon buns on a picnic blanket under the tree.

"You remind me of my wife." Mikoto had been prepared for insults, threats, and disdain, but had not expected the soft—almost grief-stricken—response. Mindful to continue rubbing the sleeping babe's back, Mikoto turned fully to take in the Hyuuga who was watching the children with a hollowness in his eyes.

"I knew Hisani." Mikoto pictured a shower of dark blue hair, a smile that seemed exotic coming from a clan characterized by lack of expression. "We attended the Academy in the same year. Although our clan differences kept us from becoming friends, I remember that she was kind to everyone. Definitely nicer than I was. I had heard she passed…but not how. What happened to her, Hiashi?"

“She gave birth and all seemed to be as it should be. Hisani was tired and slept often but the labor had been a long one and I put it from my mind.” Hiashi rasped and the man’s pearly eyes glistened with a watery sheen. “But a week after Hanabi was born, a fever came over her in the middle of the night. The medics did all they could, but they suggested the infection had been there all along disguised by her exhaustion. Nothing they did worked and she died within hours.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” The words came automatically and Mikoto felt she meant them this time. As a kunoichi, death was something she encountered often, but a loss outside the battlefield seemed so utterly senseless. And it was clear to Mikoto that Hiashi was handling her passing badly.

“My thanks.” Came the gruff reply and Mikoto knew she could not leave things in such…a mess.

“I will do what I can for Hinata while she is in my care and you may send Hanabi as well if you believe this will be of benefit.”

“Are you suggesting that I am incapable of looking after my children?” The man’s guard was back up and there was clear aggression in his stance. Again, Mikoto found Hiashi predictably similar to Fugaku: bull-headed idiots indeed.

“You are angry, grieving, and you are *not* fine.” Mikoto snapped, fully embracing her old friend’s gumption while keeping her voice to a low, threatening whisper. “Pretend all you want to the clan elders, but I’ve seen the looks you’ve given your daughter. And I’ve seen how you look at your brother’s son. I know that you obviously love your children, but you’re so lost in your own grief that you aren’t thinking straight. I’m offering to help you not for any political gain, but because it’s the right thing to do.”

Ominously, the sun vanished behind a shield of grey clouds and rain began to pour. The children all began to shriek and run for cover.

“It appears the weather has turned. I think it’s time you leave.” Hiashi’s face was like stone and his arms were extended in a clear demand. Mikoto felt a keen sense of helplessness as her good faith offering was all but thrown back in her face.

“As you wish.” Mikoto regretfully turned over Hanabi and felt a keen sense of regret when the baby settled before starting to cry again, louder and louder. Turning away was like taking a knife to the

back and Mikoto felt nothing but failure.

"Hiashi, whether you want to hear it or not…I hope you understand that you don't have to do all this alone. My Clan always wants to do things themselves and it has not made us any better…I think we're on the road to change but it's a difficult road."

With that thought, Mikoto moved to gather her ducklings as escape the Hyuuga Compound as quickly as possible.

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Mikoto's chakra felt disturbed, but Minato knew better than to say anything. Something definitely had occurred to disturb the normally imperturbable woman but seeing how pinched her lips were, he complied easily with saying a hasty goodbye to Hinata, Neji, and Shino with promises to see all three of them at the Nara residence in a couple days.

Stepping outside, they children stared dubiously at the overwhelming downpour that no sane person would willingly venture into.

"We're walking home in that?" Sasuke looked more than a little dismayed at the prospect.

"I've played in the rain lots of times, Sasuke. It's not so bad." Naruto stuck a hand out from under the shelter and flicked a few droplets toward a disgruntled Sasuke.

"You guys look like you're trapped by the weather!" They all jolted until the spotted a familiar, soaked chunin approaching from the entrance carrying a folded up umbrella. Minato gave a short wave of welcome before burying his fingers in his coat pockets.

"Gumhead! You're here!" Minato nudged Naruto who ignored the elbow to the gut and continued his loud antics, further irritating the bristling chakra signatures in the trees. "If you brought an umbrella, why aren't you using it? You're completely soaked!"

"It's Shisui." Sasuke remarked as if that alone explained everything. "Obviously he's stupid."
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“Yeah, I guess.” Minato shivered. They were certainly amazing friends, but it never boded well when the two of them agreed on anything.

Kids. Minato just shook his head.

“Hi brats!” Shisui grinned despite his entire wardrobe being sopping wet and his remaining hair clinging to his skull. The older boy futile mopped the wetness away from his eyes. “Soon as I saw the storm appear, I figured I’d better bring you and umbrella, oba-san!”

“You’re right on time, Shisui-nii.” He complimented the other boy. “You really ought to teach us the shunshin sometime.”

“We’ll see.” The chunin waggled his eyebrows that did a fairly good impression of drowning caterpillars.

“You’re a good boy, Shisui-kun.” Mikoto accepted the umbrella without commenting further and Minato found his concern growing with the atypical behavior. She was behaving very strangely and it was making him more and more uncomfortable as time went by. “Thank you.”

“What about us?” Naruto rounded on the other boy. “Why didn’t you bring more than one?!”

“What about you?” There was a flicker of danger in Shisui’s almost predatory posture.

“You deliberately didn’t bring us one.” Sasuke concluded, looking increasingly vengeful as he cracked his knuckles.

“What?” Naruto’s outrage was apparent and he swept a fist toward Shisui that the chunin evaded with a cheeky roll of his eyes. Despite missing, Minato could see that the punch was definitely more grounded and steady than it would have been before Naruto’s little spar with Hinata today: Minato was impressed.

“So that’s how it is, Shisui-nii.” Minato was more amused than anything else. “Bring it on.”

“Go on then.” Mikoto pushed them, a ghost of a smile appearing on her face. “Why don’t we see how long it takes Shisui to catch you guys in a game of tag. Stay together and evade him as long as you can. You can have a nice, warm bath as soon as you get home.”

"We can do it kaa-san! Just you watch!"

"Big words, let's see if you can live up to them!" Knuckles cracked and Shisui winked at them a little too brightly. "Run away little kiddies!"

Not needing to be told twice, they bolted into the deluge. The rainfall instantly soaked through their clothes and Minato was ridiculously thankful that Mikoto had tied his hair back for him today. The streets had emptied with the downpour which meant they did not have to worry about dodging civvies while splashing through ever-growing puddles that flung mud and grit everywhere. Thankfully the rain was on the warmer side and did not noticeably lower their body temperatures.

"We need to ditch him somehow. We can't let that gumhead win!" Naruto's competitive streak was showing and Sasuke looked to be in complete agreeance. And Minato was not about to let someone else beat him in a game of tactics. Not easily anyway.

"Hiding is out of the question. He's too close." Sasuke's stamina was being sorely tested after a spar with Neji and the Uchiha did not have the benefit of a bijuu in his belly to keep his reserves high. Nevertheless, Sasuke was not about to just give up and Minato respected his friend for his determination.

The footfalls of splashing pursuit sounded far too close for comfort, which called for delay tactics. Pumping a bit of chakra into his feet, he attached himself to the side of a building and only slipped for a second before he adequately adjusted for his reserves and continued to run along the side of the building and avoid the puddles. It only took a moment before Naruto and Sasuke joined him on a mad scramble along the walls.

"Methinks you're slowing down, kiddies!" Shisui sounded utterly delighted and Naruto craned his neck to stick his tongue out at the older boy.

"Shut it, jerk!"

Minato giggled as Naruto and Sasuke growled angrily at the provocation. This was more fun than he expected!

Fishing a sweet bun out of his pocket that he had been saving for later, Minato tested the weight of the potential projectile in his hand for a moment. It was a gross misuse of Hinata's favorite treat, but at

least the birds would appreciate it later. Leaping high, Minato torqued his body midair and flung the sticky bun with as much force as he could manage straight at Shisui's face. The maneuver seemed to pay off because the older boy reared back defensively with a surprised squeak. Not willing to waste the opening, Minato finished twisting until he was firmly back on the ground and raced across the sodden road.

"You got him!" Naruto looked more and more excited as he started scanning the terrain.

"We need to find something to get him with?" Sasuke spluttered as he wiped at the water that was pelting them continuously.

"It was a lucky shot and I don't think we're going to catch him off-guard again." Minato's legs burned as the water splashed his already soaked body.

"Got that right!" Shisui blurred into view directly in their path with crossed arms and a superior smirk on his face despite the rain pouring down on him.

"Get him!" Naruto roared.

"Way ahead of you, dobe!" Sasuke readied a fist and raced toward Shisui.

"No, wait!" Minato tried to stall them just as Shisui vanished with a pop of chakra leaving a stick behind and causing Sasuke and Naruto to crash into each other.

"Gumhead!" Naruto groaned as he sat up and rubbed his head. Sasuke merely projected immature killing intent and frantically searched the area for his cousin. "He's dead!"

Minato was already running for the spot he felt Shisui's chakra appear at and pushed himself off the ground and attached himself to Shisui's back. Minato realized the other boy could have dumped him and almost felt sympathetic for instigating revenge against someone who was 'letting them win' but it was Shisui's decision so who was he to question it?

A few seconds later and Sasuke and Naruto charged Shisui. The chunin in question staggered in an exaggerated fashion, his chakra bubbling like joy, before the swaying teen toppled sideways

dragging the trio with him into the mucky dirt.

Minato managed to avoid a mouthful of dirty water, but a second later Naruto's flailing sent a hail of grit and mud in his direction.

"Ack, Naruto!" Minato rolled to the side and scrubbed at his eyes, hearing scuffling and rolling.

"Shisui, we're all covered in dirt now!" Minato ignored Sasuke's complaining and carefully blinked his eyes open.

Apparently that was a mistake since Naruto took that second to jump in a puddle right next to him splashed Minato right in the face.

"That's it!" Minato wiped his eyes on his soggy sleeve and stomped on his own puddle and smirked evilly when Shisui and his two friends spluttered in shock.

"Alright! Splash attack!" Naruto surged forward and started peddling his arms in the water kicking up spray in all of their faces.

Sasuke swiftly retaliated by tackling Naruto into the water. Minato rather suspected that Sasuke just preferred to physically demolish someone after losing so badly to Neji earlier. Shisui whipped out a few hand signs and Minato recognized vaguely as a weak futon jutsu; throwing his hands up, Minato gasped as he was clobbered by a wave of wind propelled water until he landed on his rear a good dozen feet away from a laughing Shisui.

Minato rubbed a red eye blearily and gagged up a mouthful of water. A moment later, Sasuke was staggering to his knees and the Senju felt his friend grab his arm and tug him upward. He whispered thanks to which his friend gave him a short nod. To no surprise, Naruto was already on his feet with a defiant look enhanced by muddy streaks that looked like war paint decorating his face.

"Sasuke, Minato, you guys distract him." Naruto cracked his knuckles promisingly. "I'll get him."

"On it." Minato confirmed. At this point, Shisui should know he had a good beating coming and Minato was more than happy to assist the blonde in a sinister scheme.

"Make it good, Naruto." Sasuke stepped away and planted

his feet in a ready position.

"I'm all over it."

Minato and Sasuke shared a glance, the Senju subtly lifted a finger and gestured. Shisui was still laughing, still a chunin, and still way out of their league, but Minato knew the other boy would play along to a certain extent and if anyone could pull off a fun victory it would be his son.

"Want another beating huh?" Shisui grinned.

The duo charged forward while Naruto stayed in reserve until they were three-quarters of the way to their target when Minato veered off. It was not much of a plan, but Minato felt it was a positive that they had a plan at all. Shisui's head turned to follow his momentum for a second and Sasuke used the opportunity to close the distance and take a swing for the chunin's gut. Minato swung around from the opposite side, but he had not closed in quite yet. Sasuke's attack was agilely dodged and Shisui's eyes glinted with amusement as Minato ran toward the other boy who had turned to intercept him.

"Take this bastard!" Naruto used Sasuke's position to launch himself up to Shisui's face and smash a glowing blob of mud that had been sticking to Naruto's hand into the startled chunin's face. It was a feat that would have been impossible for the jinchuuriki prior to learning a more advanced form of chakra control and part of Minato really couldn't believe what had just happened. If his eyes had not been deceived, Naruto had developed his first technique. Definitely more of a handy E-rank parlour trick, but potentially useful.

Shisui was on the ground hacking and choking up mud but there was a trace of disbelieving wonder on the chunin's face. Sasuke had not gotten a clear view of what happened, but looked relatively pleased with his relative's gagging so raised a fist to bump together with Naruto. Minato on the other hand was trying to wrap his head around what exactly Naruto had done.

A second later and the hair stood up and there was a surge of familiar chakra. Minato grinned in delight when he was plucked from his feet and lifted into lanky, strong arms.

"Maa, looks like you've been beaten Shisui-kun." Kakashi's voice rumbled in greeting. "You're all dirty, pup."

"Yep." Minato's nose tickled by the sent of explosive residue, smoke,

and blood. An assassination mission would explain why the arms wrapped around him felt like iron. Without attempting to free himself, Minato wrapped his arms around his brother's torso and tucked his face into the damp flak jacket and listened to the frantic heartbeat beneath his ear ease into a staggered rhythm. A little more water was hardly going to make much of a difference.

"I'm glad you're here." A hand wandered to his ponytail and gave it an affectionate tug.

"Ugh, it's you." Minato heard Naruto grumbling below. "You better not be kidnapping him again!!"

"Hmm." Kakashi's chakra uncoiled and the man gave Naruto a lazy eye-smile. "Did you say something, Naruto?"

He was about to ask the other boy when a voice rang out in a voice that was far too familiar even after two decades sealed way; some things, some people were just unforgettable.

"Is that you Hatake-brat?" Someone called in a voice that rang far too familiar in Minato's ear and his brother jolted to alertness. Whipping his head around, Minato peered through the sprinkling rain toward where three individuals stood near the shinobi check-in station.

Even in a downpour wearing a cape, Jiraiya-sensei is unmistakeable. A few spikes of white hair, a few more lines that are just visible due to the street lights, and an overall sense of amusement. Next to the overly tall Sannin, Tsunade looked no less imposing though her chakra emanated with varying degrees of skittishness and rage. The healer's faithful shadow, Shizune, looked far more tolerant and almost wistful as she looked around her as if memorizing different details.

And if there is person capable of seeing through Minato's carefully crafted deception, it will be Jiraiya. Keeping his former name is a detriment under these circumstances, but it had seemed like the best course of action at the time. Still this left Minato wondering if he had possibly made a grave error somewhere along the line. Though he supposed he could always fall back on just telling Jiraiya the truth if at all necessary.

"Breathe." *Minato heard the voice and blinked once before reappearing in the artificial grove next to his best friend.*

"If I'm going to make a mistake, this is where I make it." Minato stared at his snow-pale reflection in a false lake looking equally grim and a touch shy of nervous. "I'm only human, Kurama. I can't always help feeling nervous."

"The truth is more simplistic than that." *Giant tails freely swayed through the air creating gusts of disturbed territory with each motion.* **"Jiraiya was the closest thing you ever had to a father. For that alone he is the one most likely to unravel your secrets, Minato. But the real danger is the one you already know about but refuse to acknowledge. You *want* him to find out the truth."**

"I don't." Minato denied it; and for an instant he swore the image on the pond was of a man with spiky, golden hair and with cerulean eyes and…a great paw splashed the image and all that was left was an almost girlish face with curiously red eyes staring forlornly at the surface.

"Before you befriended me, deceiving yourself would have been a simple matter." *Kurama's voice was curiously patient and gentle—very unlike his massive friend.* **"But now I share your every thought and see what you see. And I can sense how much feel Jiraiya could be trusted. You see him like I saw the Sage. But unlike my old man, Jiraiya has always been loyal to Konoha first. Even if he were to believe you, every word you spoke to him would be relayed to the Sandaime and soon enough those words would reach Danzo and possibly Obito's ears."**

'You don't know that, Kurama.' But those words were desperation themselves. 'If Jiraiya-sensei believes me, I know I could persuade him to— '

'If.' *Kurama plucks him from the ground and drops in a paw and stares down dispassionately.* **'Are you willing to gamble your son's life on a chance?'**

'That's not fair.' He rasped. 'You yourself have already reminded me that Naruto isn't my son.'

'While that remains true, your love for him burns brightly as ever. You are…coping better than I had hoped. Perhaps acceptance is not out of the question, given time. But you saw what happened in that future, Minato. We lost. And you cannot gamble this new chance away on hopes and dreams that have no place in this world.'

'How is it that you're the one that has been imprisoned unfairly

the longest yet you can see more clearly than I can sometimes? You don't deserve what we've done to you, Kurama. I'm sorry for what I had to do.' The small boy reached out and stroked the vulpine face gently. The monstrous fox chuffed but allowed the touch. 'You're right, Kurama. I can't pin this new future on hope.'

'Don't lump yourself in with the rest of your species, Minato.' *The fox looked almost devilish for a moment.* **'You may have sealed us both away, but my revenge will be exacted on someone who truly deserves his fate. Besides, we need to celebrate.'**

'Eh?' Minato blinked feeling rather clueless.

A tail smacked the unsuspecting jinchuuriki with a mouthful of fluff. 'Ack! Kurama!'

'Tsunade being here means we don't have to tolerate the filthy Uchiha Clan anymore.' *The massive bijuu purred contently and Minato narrowed in on the fuzzy chakra that radiated something far more sinister than malevolence: joy.*

'You…' he stuttered, catching himself with the fox's maw closed in a bit too close for comfort. Best friend or not, Minato knew better than to test the limit's of the bijuu's patience. 'I thought you had gotten over our friendship with Sasuke.'

'Itachi is…fine. Shisui is a fool but harmless to us. Sasuke mettle will be tested by me at a later time. Still…the Sharingan is disgusting, evil, and I loathe its existence. As much as I detest that accursed Senju family, my tolerance for them is significantly greater.'

'Really feeling the love, Kurama.' Minato mumbled.

'I merely hate your Clan and everything they stand for, not you.' *Kurama snorted, his large eyes beginning to droop and Minato felt himself shooed out of reach of the spear-like claws.*

'Right then.' Somehow, the Senju had a feeling that was as good as it was going to get. Minato released his grip on the cage. 'Thanks again, old friend.'

'Quit annoying me and get out of here.'

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To Tsunade, the rain was a mild irritation compared to the massive migraine she was currently suffering. Jiraiya had 'suggested' they seek shelter but Tsunade just wanted to get to Konoha, meet with sensei, and get the hell out of the Kami forsaken village.

Her forefather's stone faces felt unbearably constricting and unfairly guilty.

'I don't care what you think of me Oji-san. I'm not the naïve little girl you once knew. And pigs will fly before I stay another night in this godforsaken village.'

the blonde ground her heel and resisted the urge to put Jiraiya through a wall. That could wait until after she had given Sarutobi-sensei a piece of her mind.

"Tsunade-sama, are you staying now?" There was something akin to wonder or hero worship on the brunette's face. This chunin was probably just going to be another dead bit of fodder and she would never see him again and she was not likely to remember this later since she intended to be as smashed as humanly possible.

Looking back sourly at the doe eyed boy—because no thirteen-year-old chunin was truly an adult—Tsunade shook her head roughly and turned away.

"She's having a bad day. Don't take it personally kid." There was her old friend trying to smooth over her rough edges for her. It was one of the few aspects of her old friend that Tsunade had the most patience for since it was less offensive than his more persistent habits.

"Let's just get this over with, Jiraiya."

Tsunade ignored the rain splattering her legs and the mud clinging to her heels as she stomped forward. Jiraiya made some vague excuse and was quick to catch up to her. The medic felt a bit badly for causing Shizune discomfort, but she promised herself she would make it up to the girl later. Maybe they would stop buy a resort, gambling town and Shizune could get a nice massage.

"Is that you, Hatake-brat?" Jiraiya called out like the loudmouth he was. Tsunade folded her arms and felt a simmering resentment that she managed to contain as her teammate addressed a tall man with gravity defying hair—even in the downpour. Said man was holding a dirty child with a similar hair color while two other

youngsters resembling drowned rats stood next to an equally grubby looking teenager. It reminded Tsunade of all the reasons that it was possibly a lucky break that she had skipped parenthood. Unless Dan of course—

Tsunade slammed the door on that line of thinking, hardened, and whipped around so fast that her hood fell backward and the rain—easing up, thank goodness—merely sprinkled her hair with dampness.

"Welcome home, Jiraiya-sama." Namikaze's apprentice nodded respectfully to Jiraiya and once to her—not that she bothered returning said gesture. Though she did make eye contact, briefly noting the way the copy-nin shifted child to his hip and wrapped a protective arm around the youngster. "Tsunade-sama, it's…good to see you back."

There was something hidden there buried in that tone of voice that she could not readily identify, but Tsunade was not in the mood for mind games. There would be enough of those later.

"I'll have to give you a new autographed copy of my latest book." Jiraiya offered and Tsunade fought back a scowl at the mention of the disgusting literature. "I'll catch up with you after we check in with my sensei."

"Thank you, Jiraiya-sama."

Before Tsunade could snag her teammate's ear and drag him to the tower, she felt a preternatural stillness fall over the man at her side.

Jiraiya has his quirks, but even a decade since their last altercation, Tsunade was capable of recognizing when her most loyal friend was on guard. Her unease flickering, the blonde scanned the group and settled on the dark haired youth that was wiping away smears of mud from his hitai-ate. The teen's face was peculiarly expressive and the coloring screamed Uchiha, but there hardly seemed anything that Jiraiya would have reacted to. Scoffing, she barely glanced at the smaller Uchiha, but paused and felt herself soften with understanding as her gaze travelled over impossibly wide sky-blue eyes and familiar spiky blonde hair. The possession marks told another rather heartbreaking story and the Senju patted her old friend. So old pains…it certainly made a sort of sense now.

"Shizune and I can deal with sensei ourselves, Jiraiya." Tsunade had experienced enough loss in her life to not wish it on

another person. Jiraiya had never been the same after his beloved student's death and she knew from experience he would never completely heal from that.

Tsunade was sure some part of sensei disapproved of Jiraiya's lack of involvement in Naruto's life; still, she was not about to cast stones when she would hardly have fared any better.

Namikaze's brat had hauled himself to his feet and called out with every once of his mother's brashness.

"I'm going to be the Hokage, dattebayo!" Tsunade's eyes closed and she heard that same declaration echo in her own ears from the two men that she had lost far too soon. "And my friends are going to be my ANBU generals."

"There is no such thing, dobe!" Another voice protested.

"Good to hear it, kid." There was some of her comrade's brashness, but Jiraiya had lost none of his stiffness. If anything, Tsunade could have sworn the man was about to start firing off jutsus.

"What is—?" A non-subtle elbow jabbed into her side and Tsunade instinctively raised her fist only for a gauntleted hand to beat her to the punch and tap her own chakra-charged fist before pointing a finger.

"Look?"

"Yes, I see Namikaze's brat." Tsunade hissed at just above a whisper, but kept her attention focused on her obviously distraught comrade. "Jiraiya I'm going— "

"Hime!" Jiraiya interrupted her again and an instant later he was behind her and giving her a rough shake. "Look again!"

Feeling disgruntled and knowing her hair was now clinging unpleasantly to her face, the Senju woman turned back and looked past the blonde bundle of energy that had dismissed their presence and was chatting with the broody mini-Uchiha. The teenage Uchiha had placed himself at Hatake's side and was reaching for the silver haired boy, saying something in tones she could not quite make out and the child turned his head toward her. Scarlet eyes blinked at her, while that silver hair that she had previously disregarded added another piece to the puzzle. Most damning of all was the rainwater that was eroding the last bit of mud from the child's face. Underneath

the muck, a signature red slash adorned a cheek. The child—Kami the child looked almost waifish—turned his face revealing the identical, damning mark on the opposite cheek.

“Tsunade-sama, is that?” Shizune asked her and Tsunade felt a giggle morph into a sob in her throat before clenching her teeth and her ears started to ring. It was as if the all the air had been expelled from her lungs in an instant. Any notions about an easy exit fled and Tsunade felt herself recoiling in a panic.

No…no…it could not be. It was impossible! What the hell was going on? What kind of sick joke was this? What the hell? What the hell? I’m going to kill whoever thought this was funny. I’m going to-

“Tsunade-sama.” Shizune had latched onto her elbow and the Sannin could sense the woman’s erratic heartrate from their close proximity. She shrugged off the woman’s attentions almost viciously and could rustle up the effort to feel guilty about it.

Sarutobi-sensei had a lot of explaining to do and if she was not satisfied with the outcome, a new office would be the smallest of his concerns.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Okay! Sorry for the delay. Two days after Christmas, I order a new computer. The next day my old computer stopped working completely. So a big, wonderful thank you to my best friend "R" for going through my files and recovering this chapter and some other documents from my computer. Seriously, rewriting this thing from scratch would have ruined my day.

Thank you to everyone who has given my story a chance. And a HUGE thank you to my reviewers. It was a really discouraging series of events but you guys kept me from throwing in the towel. Love you guys and hope to hear from you again!

Chapter 9: Rocky Roads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Agitated did not begin to describe Tsunade's mood. Being dragged to the home she had sworn never return to was annoying, but the fact that sensei had duped Jiraiya into doing his dirty work just pissed her off. Topping off her foul mood, Tsunade and Shizune had been cooped up for the last few nights in a shared hotel room with that lecherous schmuck; not only were Jiraiya's perversions annoying, but they disrupted Tsunade's efforts to imbibe copious amounts of alcohol, lose repeatedly at any and all gaming tables, and ingest a moderate amount of barbiturates. All of her painstaking efforts to bury her past—the memories far too precious to forget and far too painful to remember—were for nothing.

Now, before Tsunade even had the chance to wrap her arms around that scrawny, geezer's neck, Sarutobi-sensei had thrown what was left of her life into chaos.

The child in the Hatake kid's arms was horrifying real and more terrifying than some of the worst genjutsus she had ever experienced. Tsunade's last hope was that the boy was a figment of her own broken mind or a drug-induced hallucination, but she observed the way the masked jounin's arms tightened a fraction around the source of Tsunade's mental break and knew this was all too real.

Perhaps most disarming of all was that Tsunade may have been unable to see Hatake's face beneath the mask, but she could sense the hostility, like that of a trapped animal, oozing from the lanky male. Jiraiya must have perceived the same reluctance in Namikaze's student that Tsunade had noticed because the toad-sage was already stepping forward with his hands raised in a placating manner that worked far too often on shinobi than was reasonable to expect.

"Looks like those kids have been having a good time playing, Kakashi." Tsunade wondered how Jiraiya could sound so relaxed when she felt like she was about to throw up at any moment.

"So, they are." The Hatake brat replied with false levity, the

poor street lighting refracting dully on the damp gray spikes.

In Hatake's arms, the child squirmed and those scarlet eyes roamed from Shizune, to Jiraiya, and finally to Tsunade, fixing her with an intelligent, hopeful, and somewhat guarded look that seemed far too old on such a young face.

He knows me. He's waiting for me. Then…then…oh Kami, no. Just no!

"It's cold out here." Tsunade heard the blonde whine as bile rose in Tsunade's throat. "Can we go home, Itachi-nii?"

"That's a good idea there, kiddo." Jiraiya had already moved forward, plunked an oversized hand onto the blonde's head, and unintentionally fed her hysteria by leaving her a clear view of the scarlet markings on otherwise perfect, alabaster skin.

I'm going to be sick.

"Go home and get cleaned up." Jiraiya was still talking and Tsunade was held petrified by the internal warzone she was fighting against herself. "You kids look pretty cool. So how about you squirts get cleaned up and meet us back at the Hokage's Tower for a nice visit after we chat with the old man."

"Who are you calling old? Your hair is white too, you old geezer!" Namikaze's brat yelled loudly. "And what kind of weird adult wants to hang out with kids anyway? I heard tou-san tell kaa-san that he arrested a pedophile that wanted to hang out with kids! What if this guy is a pedophile too?"

"I am not a pedophile!" Jiraiya spluttered.

Tsunade would have found it more humorous had the situation not been such a disaster.

"Tou-san said that?" Another high-pitched, boy's voice asked, obviously ignoring her old friend's protests. "Must be true than. Tou-san wouldn't lie."

"Naruto-kun!" The Uchiha teen broke into the conversation swiftly. "Jiraiya-sama is the Sandaime's student. He's one of our village's most powerful shinobi."

"Him?" The duo asked together dubiously.

“I heard Jiraiya-sama taught the Yondaime Hokage.” The timbre of the nameless boy’s voice was pitched higher like all younger children, but each word was enunciated carefully as if the speaker had mulled over the words before speaking. It would have sounded alarm bells had Tsunade not attributed it to be a trait the child shared with Tobirama. “If that’s the case, perhaps Jiraiya-sama could teach you something, Naruto-kun.”

Not a dream. Not a dream. Okay, the kid is talking and every word out of his mouth is horrifying. What do I do? Oh, Kami, what am I going to do?

“Aha!” The blonde shouted and the bizarre debacle continued seemingly oblivious to Tsunade’s mounting panic. “You better teach me something cool, dattebayo!”

“You certainly came to the right place, gaki!” Her friend boasted tediously. “You get cleaned up and you have yourself a deal. I’ll teach you an ace technique!”

Blah, blah, blah. Shizune was whispering something in her ear and the woman had grabbed her elbow in a more firmly supporting grip, but it all seemed so far away. All she could feel was old wounds reopening to seep poison into her thoughts. All she could see was a tiny child with an uncanny smile and the face of a dead man. A face overflowing with compassion aimed squarely in her direction.

Tsunade couldn’t help it, she giggled tensely and felt hysteria overtake her natural senses and she swayed slightly on her feet.

Around her people reacted; Jiraiya reached for her, Shizune’s grip tightened on her arm, and Hatake seemed to have reached some sort of decision and was gesturing to the older Uchiha teens. A snorted giggle popped out of her mouth, and Tsunade watched a pale hand reach out toward her, the little bow mouth moving. Speaking. Communicating something.

Oh Kami. Oh no.

Tsunade recoiled backward frantically, knocking away Shizune’s restraining arm and feeling the ground crack around her heeled feet.

“Tsunade! Hime!” Jiraiya was coming toward her again and

she shied away with a hissed warning.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

Instinctively she ripped at the rain coat, tossed it away, hunched over just in time to vomit up the meagre breakfast she had consumed. Her throat burned and she dabbed furiously at the corners of her mouth. Before she could make out the words buzzing around from her companions, her eyes unconsciously flickered right back to the trigger of her present misfortunes. The Senju child—for whatever else could that boy be—had a crinkle on his forehead and something that reminded Tsunade of regret on that far too young face. Tsunade looked away and saw the Hatake's center of gravity shift and the muscles tense.

No.

Tsunade lurched forward with impressive dexterity considering her nausea, but she was far too late: the formerly occupied space was empty.

He's gone. Why am I always too late? I'm always too late! I just can't take this.

"No!" Tsunade heard herself scream and the chakra came to her fist as naturally as breathing.

There was an unsatisfying roar as dust and debris went flying in every direction and the remainder of the area obscured the massive cloud of dust caused by the explosion. Tsunade screamed harshly again and felt droplets, that had nothing to do with the weather, dampen her cheeks. The aftershocks of her impromptu quake rocked the ground but they weren't enough to soothe the ache in her heart. She wanted to break something. She wanted to rip someone apart! Raising a fist over her head, she swung downward—only to be ripped backward by arms snaked around her midsection.

"Let me go or I'll rip your arms out of your sockets!" She screamed at her assailant.

"You won't!" Jiraiya's words teased her ear.

She wanted to fight. She wanted to scream. Tsunade wanted to obliterate the looming monument that was silently mocking her. Instead, she sagged in Jiraiya's arms, until she could feel pebbles and grit bite into the unprotected skin of her lower legs, and she sobbed.

She heard Jiraiya murmuring nonsensically to her, but Tsunade just wanted to drown in this misery until everything hurt a little bit less. At some point, Jiraiya must have realized she was in no condition to continue her stunted rampage and the grip around her waist loosened. Tsunade pitched forward slightly and she felt a fleeting sense of abandonment, and than she was swept upward into Jiraiya's arms like a bride. Ever a medic, she effortlessly read Jiraiya's steady heartbeat and noted the lecherous hands had not made any move to be inappropriate. Reluctantly thankful, Tsunade dropped face into the man's shoulder and continued weeping.

I know why I'm here now. I don't know the story, but I know sensei and I can't. I can't. I can't! Oh Kami, Jiraiya please don't let them do this. PLEASE!

"Shizune, if you'll stay with the ANBU?" Jiraiya's voice again. Strange to realize that a boy she had once considered nothing but a loser was now Tsunade's only island in an ocean she was drowning in. Tsunade sank her hands into Jiraiya's haori and hated herself when a whine escaped her throat. The arms around her flexed and she felt sure the man's lips brushed her forehead for a moment. "Tsuna, I'm not leaving. I promise."

The words were comforting but not for the value of the words themselves, but only because the speaker was the only person left alive that Tsunade could truly rely on.

Oh Kami, Baa-sama…oji-sama. Oji-san. I can't do this. I can't do this. Nawaki. Dan. I just. I can't do this! Please, no.

"Tsunade-sama. I'll follow as soon as I can. Stay strong." Shizune again. Such a loyal girl even when she hardly deserved it.

I may have more strength than any man or woman living, but I'm not strong. I can destroy mountains and eradicate disease, but what is the value in emptiness? It should have been me that died…but I'm still here. I can't breathe. I can't do this. I can't do this!

"Tsuna, we're here." That was an old name and it made her older than her body was underneath her layered illusions. "Just hang in for me and I'll get you a nice cup of the good stuff in sensei's office. Just like old times?"

"Old times are full of dead people."

To that, not even the exuberant Jiraiya had a reply.

Sensei's office looked the same as it had ten years before; a steaming mug of tea set next to sporadic piles of paperwork, and the engrained woody scent of the pipe tobacco from tea country. Jiraiya had sat down on a bench that had appeared out of nowhere and was supporting her in an alarmingly respectful manner with a hand around her waist that did not stray from a supporting role.

"-think she's in shock." Jiraiya was saying over her head.

Oh. Tsunade blinked and realized she was facing a heavy carpet that bore an exquisite if faded pattern that had certainly been walked on quite enough.

"How Biwako-chan ever put up with you remains a mystery." That old bat Koharu? "Hiruzen, get Tsunade a drink and I'll arrange for some rooms to be made-up at your house. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you, Koharu." Sensei actually sounded thankful too as he exchanged a few pleasantries with the old battle-axe. That was interesting since she was rather sure sensei had not been on the best of terms with his former teammate before she left. Not that it was any of her business, of course.

"You back with us, Hime?" Jiraiya's voice sounded like he was coaxing a spooked horse than an S-ranked shinobi.

"I don't know." She hardly recognized the croaky sound that emerged from her throat. A few seconds of concentration and Tsunade flushed her internal system with medical chakra. A few surges jolted her network and Tsunade carefully raised upward to manage residual traces of adrenaline in her system and ease the swelling in her throat. "I've been better, but I've also been worse." She paused before turning her ire on the robed Kage with a chilling mile. "Although this may actually meet my top-five worst moments."

"I had not intended you to find out this way." Sensei's craggy face had more lines and a few more brown, age spots than the last time she saw him. There was an unmistakeable aura of power that clung to the man like a comfortable skin, but there were telling details ever her distracted mind perceived. Discoloration of the eyes and a thinness that suggested several potential underlying conditions. Of course, it was practically unheard of—if one discounted Fence-sitter Ohnoki—for a Kage to continue living let alone reigning into their elderly years. While chakra allowed a person to push a withering body

well beyond physical limitations, age itself was a sign of the mortality that all humans must face in time.

The troubling thing was, Tsunade could see all these different problems weighing down a man that she still cared about no matter how much she drank and pretended otherwise. And ironically enough, Sarutobi Hiruzen had been the longest surviving parental figure that Tsunade had. And the fact of the matter is, she found herself entirely unsympathetic to a man that she cared about. She wanted answers more than she wanted to placate an old man whose days were numbered.

Tsunade forced her stiff limbs into motion and only wobbled for a second before crossing the room to where sensei was known to stash his booze. Not really caring about the opinion of anyone in the nearby vicinity—or anywhere else—Tsunade ripped the cork out and chugged several burning mouthfuls.

"You have to admit sensei…things appear to be going a lot differently. Not just with.. you know."

"A lot has changed in the last month, Jiraiya." The old man's voice even sounded older. Not weaker, but certainly aged.

"Start talking, old man." Tsunade squeezed the bottle tight. "And don't bother trying to hide anything. You spill your guts and give me answers or I'll leave this place in ruins before I walk out of here."

"Alright." The old man answered wearily. "But let me speak without interruptions. You may ask questions afterward. Is that fair?"

"Fair enough." Jiraiya reclined back, wove a few signs, and a crack of chakra reactivated the office's privacy seals to potent levels humming chakra that raised the hair on the back of Tsunade's neck.

"Were my seals really so inefficient, Jiraiya?" The look Jiraiya shot sensei was positively sheepish and did little to settle Tsunade's mood.

"Get on with it." Tsunade barked causing the two, fully-grown men to startle sharply.

Jiraiya wore reluctance like a familiar coat and Sarutobi-sensei's hands were clutching his pipe almost as if he were physically unable to let go rather than unwilling. After a significant pause, the

old man turned away with his hands clasped behind him and started telling a story.

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When they arrived back at the Compound, Mikoto had taken one look at them, listened to Shisui's garbled explanation, and promptly tossed them all into the bath. Minato did not complain when Mikoto scrubbed them almost painfully hard and rinsed their hair repeatedly until the water ran clear. With little fanfare, they were bundled into fluffy towels and ushered into their bedrooms to change.

Now he was standing over a pile of carefully folded clothing that was sitting on top of his box of fuinjutsu supplies from Kakashi. The stuffed dog his brother bought him clutched tightly to his chest, Minato felt a sense of unease.

Naruto and Sasuke were standing on either side of him shifting and frowning.

"You don't have to go." Sasuke's words tumbled out in a rush that seemed more like Naruto. "I know the Sandaime said you would only stay with us until Tsunade arrived, but there's no sense in leaving tonight."

That would merely delay the inevitable, but it made a sort of sense since Tsunade had only just arrived and there was unlikely any accommodations prepared unless Hiruzen had really been on his game. Nothing was impossible of course, but it seemed more unlikely at this point.

Minato clutched the plush dog tighter, wondered at his odd attachment to the stuffed animal, and offered his friend a tired smile. "I'm sure the Hokage knows best."

"Jiji is great." Naruto response seemed especially forced and lacked the cheer that made Naruto so unique.

"I'll still see you all the time." Minato put on his best Kage smile, reluctantly surrendered the plush dog to his pile of belongings, and slung an arm around each boy's shoulders companionably and squeezed before releasing the pair. "Besides, Tsunade-sama doesn't have any family. And neither does Kakashi. It seems like they really
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need someone to show them love and affection, just like you both have Fugaku, Mikoto, Itachi, Shisui—“ Both boys made a face and Minato merely smirked. “And you have each other. That’s more than my family has…I think they need me.”

“I guess you’re right.” Acceptance did not come easy to Uzumaki Naruto and the blonde’s eyes were downcast and so glum.

Minato turned and slung his arms around Naruto’s shaking body and bit his lip when the blonde sobbed once before returning the embrace desperately.

“I get it… I just hate it.” Naruto whispered almost brokenly in his ear and the boy’s chakra just radiated depression, causing a lump to form in Minato’s throat and tears to gather in his eyes. “Without you, I might not have found all of them and…I don’t want to lose you, dattebayo.”

There was a sniffing sound behind them.

‘*Oh no…so much for putting up a tough front. I’m so done for.’*

‘Yes you are.’ *If only his bijuu did not sound so cheerful.*

Minato felt his own eyes grow moist, fill, and overflow. And yep, he was crying like he did when he read a particularly emotional novel. Crying like he couldn’t after slaughtering an entire platoon of enemy troops. And crying now like a child his age might do.

Breaking the hug with a protesting Naruto, he reached back and dragged Sasuke into a three-way hug. Sasuke tucked his face close and his tears were much quieter compared to Naruto’s loud sobs. Minato figured he made up a good middle ground. He was neither too quiet nor too loud.

“You’re the glue that holds those two idiots together.”
“Shut it, Kurama!”

“And I’ll still be around even if I don’t fall asleep with you guys.” Minato whispered, pausing when he felt the chakra signatures hovering just outside the door. “You’re my best friends, right? You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

There was no reply to that. The moment seemed too emotional and emphasized the frayed nerves they all had. Duty called though. Minato escaped from the hugs and moved to where he could

sense Shisui and pressed himself against the older boy's side. The weight of Mikoto and Fugaku's stares was comforting rather than scrutinizing and he enjoyed feeling Shisui squeeze his shoulder comfortingly.

"Time to go?"

"It is, little silver." Shisui's voice sounded strained so he slipped his hand into the other boy's grasp and squeezed. Shisui seemed to anchor himself to his touch and straightened a bit.

"Tou-san." Minato's head shot up at the sound of Naruto's voice.

"What is it?" The answer came when the blonde's lips parted in a toothy grin and he held his hand out hopefully.

The big man sighed but accepted Naruto's hand and only grumbled a little when the blonde made a V for victory sign with his opposite hand. Sasuke sidled up on his other side and cold fingers tangled around his free hand. Minato squeezed the freezing digits but otherwise did not acknowledge the gesture; Sasuke was more skittish than a colt and would rather set himself on fire than acknowledge that he had a softer side.

Itachi and Kakashi were standing together under a street lamp just outside the house. Itachi wore a few new bruises that shaded his pale skin garishly and was eyeing Kakashi with a faint vein of disapproval evident from the slight tightening of the boy's jaw. Kakashi seemed to be his typical, quirky self with an orange book in one hand and twirling a kunai in the other. The second they appeared, the conversation ended abruptly and Kakashi gave a short wave with a notably kunai-free hand before lifting the orange novel to his face.

"What are *you* doing here, Hatake?" The Clan Head looked like he would very much like to gut Kakashi in the streets. Minato made a frustrated sound and just shook his head at Sasuke's look of concern. Not even time could erase all issues, but it was depressing how tightly Uchiha's seemed to cling to old grudges.

"Maa, I'm accompanying the pup to the Hokage Tower." Kakashi reappeared in a burst of leaves that showered their little group with leaves—much to Naruto's hyperactive delight—and ruffled Minato's loose hair. He craned his neck to look at the masked man—if an eighteen year old really *was* a man—and grinned impishly, pleased when his brother eye-smiled right back before flashing the irate

Fugaku a devilish look that was clearly more bite than bark. “Surely you wouldn’t try to keep me from my little brother, would you Fugaku-sama?”

“Do not read that filth in my presence!” The Uchiha stalked forward and their little group followed quietly with Itachi falling-in next to Kakashi whose book remained in place despite the threat.

It was going to be a long walk to the Tower.

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Jiraiya mopped his bruised forehead with a cloth and wondered if it was too late to check-out of this meeting and get plastered. Seriously, he was too old for this shit. Experimental jutsus? No problem. Experimental jutsus that combined the DNA of some of the most powerful men that had ever lived to literally create a new human being. That had been a bit of a bigger pill to swallow. Sometimes the unchecked limitations of the shinobi world really, really got on his nerves.

On the bright side, Hime seemed to be less volatile and he had avoided all of her blows except a chakra packed elbow to the forehead earlier. At the moment, Tsunade was pacing the floors and sensei was wincing every time the buxom blonde’s chakra spiked a little too menacingly.

Jiraiya really felt for the old man, he had been handed a can of worms to deal with that was not his fault. Hell, none of the evidence pointed to Danzo so that was another win as far as Jiraiya was concerned. If only this didn’t have Orochimaru’s stink clinging to it like a wet dog. If the man truly had tried to retrieve the bijuu chakra from where the Yondaime had sealed it away…Jiraiya was not sure what that meant. But the implications of such an action hardly boded well for Konoha.

“Alright, so let’s go over the facts again.” Jiraiya’s headache threatened to increase in intensity. “A child that is biologically related to Hatake Sakumo and the Nidaime appeared in the village with no reports of prior sightings. And there is no mention of his existence or alternate means of entry.”

Tsunade’s lips tightened but sensei nodded once. “That’s correct.”
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“Said child finds Uzumaki Naruto and they spend a night together before you brought the Senju kid in for questioning.” Jiraiya frowned, his mind flashing to a blonder, cerulean eyed student bearing the same name. “Has Naruto been checked for genjutsu or other methods of coercion?”

“I had Uchiha Itachi discreetly check the boy over.”

“An Uchiha?” Tsunade’s voice was rather incredulous and dismissive.

“Absolutely loyal and perhaps one of the most discreet and capable shinobi I have, despite his young age. Itachi was thorough and reported that Naruto is free of coercion.”

This was good news except that someone had made a jinchuuriki without attracting the attention of the elemental nations. Such a feat could hardly be ignored and secrets of this size were damnably difficult to keep under wraps. Moments like this made Jiraiya wonder what exactly the Shodai Hokage had been thinking when he went along with his wife’s bright idea to imprison bijuu inside human hosts.

“Back to the drawing board,” Jiraiya muttered, carefully stepping away from Tsunade before she could shoot him down again. “The kid is a jinchuuriki then?”

“Without a doubt.” The Sandaime remarked and Jiraiya felt a renewed sense of loss deep within him. “Obviously, I’ll need you to take a look at the seal at some point and I’ll need your spy network to discreetly look around for some information.”

“Uzumaki survivors wouldn’t be too much of a stretch.” Jiraiya massaged his jaw thoughtfully. “I’ll have my informants be on the lookout for information.

“I wish we had more information on the reincarnation technique used to create the boy.” Jiraiya watched Tsunade jerk sharply at sensei’s musing. “The DNA results speak for themselves, but I still feel we know too little about how the jutsu was performed and we don’t know whether Orochimaru has gotten his hands on the information.”

While Jiraiya struggled to combat his misgivings for Orochimaru having that sort of knowledge, he could not help but wonder if the niggling notion scratching at the back of his brain was

more plausible than impossible.

"Is it possible that the Senju kid is actually…*him*?" Jiraiya stressed his question cautiously despite the seals warding the room.

"If reincarnation works the way its supposed to, I doubt we would ever be able to find out short of using a kinjutsu to test it out." Hiruzen grunted. "A costly jutsu that may not work if Orochimaru only removed the bijuu chakra and nothing more. I've wondered if the soul itself could have been *his* too since the boy's name is the same, but that answer may be beyond our reach, Jiraiya. And it is far more likely the name was made as a tribute to the man that sealed Kyuubi away."

Moments like these made Jiraiya wish that whatever madness had inspired Kushina and Minato to procreate in the first place had never happened. It was something Jiraiya had admitted to no one, but he had privately thought it had been a foolish decision for Kushina to give birth considering the risks, but he had seen how much the pair he had loved like a son and daughter were looking forward to their baby. So Jiraiya had remained silent and now he was almost five years later holding onto a foolish hope that his former student's soul had returned for another go-around.

Talk about ridiculous. I've obviously missed my Minato too much if I'm dreaming up ludicrous possibilities that have no potential for being realized.

"Who knows that the boy is a jinchuuriki?" Tsunade surprised him by asking.

"Shikaku, Inoichi, Shisui, one of my ANBU and myself." Hiruzen tapped a fresh bit of tobacco into his pipe, lit it and inhaled deeply.

"Are you *sure* that Danzo doesn't know?" Jiraiya's eyes narrowed.

"Hardly. One can never be sure of anything concerning my old friend." Sensei looked truly pained to admit that, but there was a resolve in that gaze too. "I made the mistake with Naruto when word of what he was got out…I'll not make the same mistake with Minato. Even at my age, I can learn from my mistakes."

"That's something at least." Jiraiya mused. "Orochimaru has his fingers in too many pies. I had originally wanted to report

about something else I heard about him lately, but I never got the chance to verify those rumors before you called me in."

"Orochimaru is hardly the point." Tsunade kicked a chair into oblivion against the wall, showering the area with splinters of wood and broken pottery from the unfortunate vase that had been sitting against the wall. "I know what you're trying to do here old man! I know what you're thinking and just let me tell you--!"

The door swung open rather swiftly and Tsunade's words died in her throat and she straightened upright. In walked the grouchy Uchiha patriarch himself holding hands with his godson—definitely something Jiraiya needed to discuss with sensei later—and the blonde immediately raced over to the Sandaime and threw himself in the man's arms. It hurt to see that. It should have been Minato pouring over a boring border patrol report that scooped the tyke into his arms. Instead it was his sensei that, was well past the prime of his life, stuck with a job that by all rights Jiraiya or Tsunade should take; except his role as spymaster made him a poor choice and Tsunade's grief made her unsuitable. Jiraiya would wallow in his self-inflicted miseries later; preferably far away in the arms of an overpriced prostitute that would allow him to pretend that everything really was alright.

Burying his emotional turmoil for a much later day, Jiraiya looked over to where Uchiha Mikoto was standing shooting a critical eye toward Tsunade. Roving to the next, the Uchiha teen from before was slouched in the backdrop with a slightly younger boy that Jiraiya concluded were attending with the parents. Hatake Kakashi stood directly behind the Nidaime's clone with two hands on each of the boy's shoulders and a look on his face that Jiraiya remembered seeing the day he found the kid beside his father's cold corpse. Sakumo had been one of Jiraiya's good friends so his death had come as one of the greater losses in the Sannin's life, right behind Orochimaru's defection and *his* Minato's death. Still though, it was peculiar for Kakashi to seem so…uptight about this little meeting. Surely he did not expect something bad to happen to the boy.

While undeniably similar to Senju Tobirama, Jiraiya picked out features that were unique to Hatake Sakumo in the cut of the child's jaw and the shape of the eye. Subtle things, but something that someone who had known the man could discern from the features. Senju Minato, Kami the name ached like an old wound, had tipped his head sideways and the mini-Uchiha was whispering something in the boy's ear.

Jiraiya ignored the introductions for the most part, simply nodding or flashing a cheeky smile where appropriate. He was far more interested in observing from his corner. Shizune had slipped into the room soak and wet and had taken a place next to him like the good little mouse she was. Shizune had mumbled something about the ANBU cleaning up Tsunade's little mess and Jiraiya had to hand it to Hime, she really knew how to pick loyal subordinates.

"Tsunade-sama." The room quieted and the slender child walked forward and bowed slightly right in front of her and spoke in a soft voice that somehow managed to sound distinguished. "I'm Senju Minato. Sandaime-sama told me that you're my family and that you would be the one taking care of me now."

"Did he?" Jiraiya's stomach plummeted as he heard that certain inflection in the blonde woman's tone that was icy sweetness and defiance. Jiraiya took a tense step forward, suddenly just knowing something was about to go wrong.

"He did." Jiraiya watched the Senju child tense up, nose crinkling, and then Minato's face slackened and his eyes fell downward in a position that seemed disappointed, but not surprised.

For a second, Tsunade's eyes closed before snapping open with a hazy look that was partially haunted and defiant. Tsunade craned her neck to shoot sensei an almost hateful stare. Jiraiya was moving before he registered his feet lifting, but he was too late to stop the words that were aimed for her sensei and she glared the old man's way, but impacted the Senju child more than anyone else.

"You can forget it! Find someone else to raise the brat. I decline!"

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Minato had already half expected it to come to this. Technically he had been in existence 25 years—42 if you counted the years he had been sealed away with Kurama. It made it a little more difficult for Minato to cope with how irrationally miserable he felt when the buxom Senju woman sneered at the Sandaime and verbally orphaned him. He had grown up alone before and while Minato already *knew* that Kakashi would never allow that to happen, it still stung.

Minato's throat had already unhelpfully tightened and tears
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clouded his vision, but he got himself under control much quicker than an ordinary child would have and found himself speaking before he was ready.

"The last thing I have ever wanted is to be foisted upon someone that does not want me around." His throat felt like sandpaper and he brushed at his eyes roughly until he could see again. Tsunade had turned, angling her face toward him with Jiraiya lurking just behind the blonde medic with a restraining palm on her shoulder. "When I heard you were coming, I hoped that I would experience what a mother's love was. Now I know that I never shall. That dream was nothing more and nothing less than exactly that: just a dream. But I do have my friends and I have a new brother." Minato heard the intake of breath that Kakashi was not quite unable to smother directly behind him. "I wish you luck in finding something to make you happy, whatever that might be."

"Kid…" Jiraiya-sensei's voice said in that quiet, sorrowful way that Minato was far too familiar with. He ignored that and the sudden gasping breath from the blonde Sannin, and turned toward the Sandaime who was standing with a horrified Naruto clutched in his arms. Neatly, Minato offered a tiny bow to the village leader.

"Hokage-sama, I'll take my leave." Minato fled like the child he both was and was not.

He ran past his friends and darted outside the office and descended the familiar set of winding stairs that would eventually take him to the base of the tower. He swatted at the moisture once again gathering in his eyes and spilling annoyingly quick down his cheeks. It felt silly to be crying over something like this, but his stomach hurt from his emotions getting the best of him.

Still, Minato found himself running faster and up the slopes of the Hokage mountain until he was safely able to drop onto Tobirama's head. The pull was magnetic and Minato had often come up there in his previous childhood for solitude and thinking. At the time, the man's prowess with fuinjutsu and suiton jutsu had been inspiring and he had dedicated himself to surpassing the man. Now, that seemed to be his fate again in this new life.

'Your reasoning has been mildly effected by your transition to a child's body.' *Kurama's voice lulled him even as tears continued to fall and he settled down on the stone face against the wind's chill.* **'For the most part you will hardly notice a difference, but**

right now, your body's emotional state is somewhat dictated by hormones and other nonsense that make children so annoying.'

'I'm afraid.' Minato whispered to his friend, lost in a fog of the bijuu's creation. 'There isn't a reason for this, but I feel trapped by the uncertainty of what will happen to me. I was never that close to Tsunade-sama. Why do I care if she reacted like that?'

'Because emotions are not rational.' *Kurama snorted.* **'Why do you think my anger was so intense for so long? Even as a bijuu, my anger trumped all other desires because it is by far the most potent of emotions. You're not afraid, Minato.'**

'I'm angry?' Minato gasped. 'Is that…but why am I angry? I don't understand.'

'Because even though Tsunade's anger was directed at her sensei and herself, her words hurt *you.* And you were caught by surprise.'

'I suspected…that Tsunade may not react favorably, but I had hoped that just maybe she could be convinced to change.'

'If she hurts you again, I'll eat her.' *Kurama rumbled and Minato could felt the hate seeping from his old friend.*

'Kurama!' Minato yelped, somewhat scandalized by the bijuu's apparent resentment taking shape.

'Don't go all sanctimonious on me, Minato.' *He could feel the chakra within him surge and than settle.* **'Besides, what are friends for?'**

The gesture speared Minato right in the heart and he felt two more tears salt his cheeks in the corporeal realm, this time of happiness.

'I love you too.'

'Don't drag me down to your level.' Minato easily read the embarrassment in his friend's reaction and laughed happily. **'Kid. A few things. Sasuke is about to arrive and I sense the copy-nin is not far behind. But beware…I sense someone from the shadows watching you. The intent isn't hostile, but it feels wrong. I would suspect a particularly adept sensor.'**

'Danzo.' Minato hissed, mind racing furiously. Minato had

grown complacent if the man was successfully spying on him again. He needed to train some more. 'It has to be one of his men.'

'We will have to be more vigilant from now on.' *Kurama rumbled.* **'Go now.'**

Sasuke's footsteps were loud and angry behind him. The other boy dropped down next to him with chakra that hissed like a contained, wrathful storm.

"You're coming home with us."

"Probably." Minato agreed, feeling the cool wind chill his damp cheeks and closing his eyes for a moment.

"I was angry today when I saw how awful people were treating Naruto." Sasuke spoke the words like he was tasting them. "I hated them. I feel the same way now as I did then."

"People say things they don't mean when they're suffering." Minato chose his words with care. The jaded, unstable youth that had taken part in his initial resurrection was a constant reminder of how the wrong path or the wrong words could lead a person astray. "Thank you for coming to check on me. It mean's a lot."

Minato squeaked when Sasuke wrapped his arms around him once from behind and embraced him tightly. It took a second to register that Sasuke was shaking hard. For a second he was sure it was just a shared grief, but the hiss of anger distorted that illusion.

"You're important to me. Even that dobe is important. I don't care what I have to do, but I'll protect you both from now on. I promise."

"Sasuke…" The declaration was bold and naught but the promise between childhood friends, but it warmed Minato greatly. "We'll all protect each other. That's what friends are for."

"Yeah."

Sasuke had pulled back after a moment and the pair were now sitting companionably beside each other. Shisui had been unnaturally silent and his hand shifted more than once for his kunai pouch. Minato suspected that Shisui had detected Danzo's crony because Kurama had confirmed their observer's presence had vanished after they noticed a flicker of Sharingan scanning the vicinity.

The moonlight was shining with a powerful brilliance when Kakashi's shadow fell across him. Minato could sense his brother's hesitance despite the fact that he mechanically dropped into a crouch next to him. It was no doubt his former student's awkward way of trying to be supportive despite the man having no instinctive know-how. A genius beyond compare that understood none of the finer emotional nuances beyond manipulation games.

Minato promised to teach the other man and reached up without looking and grabbed Kakashi's hand. With a firm tug, he had the other man sitting next to him. Uncertainly he shivered against the cold before turning and crawling into the man's lap. Kakashi had frozen like a statue, but nevertheless allowed Minato to manipulate his arms into position to surround him. Satisfied, he leaned back against a bony shoulder and relaxed again.

"Pup." Kakashi faltered after a single word and the heart so close to his ear raced conspicuously fast.'

"It's okay, aniki." Minato snuggled in to the larger body's warmth happily. "I know you won't abandon me. I'm okay now. You can relax."

Kakashi quieted after that and his heart rate seemed pacified for the moment. From off to the side, Shisui had made a scandalized noise as Sasuke bullied Itachi into a similar position.

Everything was sure to work out. Little brothers were being looked after by the elder. And Tsunade's choice would be left to the Sannin to choose a course of action.

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Tsunade could not recall a day that had passed nearly such a humiliating fashion. There had been countless hurts in in her lifetime, but there had always been an unwanted, but sympathetic undercurrent that existed in the people around her. None of the prior empathy was in existence in Tsunade's current company unless she counted Jiraiya. Never before had home, no matter how much she decried Konoha to anyone that would listen, made her feel like an outsider. But there was no mistaking the emotions running rampant among the assembled shinobi: Tsunade was in hostile territory.

Tsunade had done as she always did when she became upset. She lashed out against the easiest target and this time the
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damage was impossible to calculate. When she had first seen Senju Minato on the street, her heart had clammed up and she had a twisted joy and panic. Her only thought as sensei had painstakingly explained the situation had been to distance herself; if she did not become attached to the kid than the pain of losing him one day would be like losing a stranger. So, she hardened her heart and when the boy, who bore such a striking resemblance to Tobirama, approached her, Tsunade's thoughts were only on the unfairness life continued to throw her direction. Her family had perished one by one on the battlefield until all that was left was an extravagant clan building with empty rooms and an impressive graveyard. She had watched the light leave the eyes of those she loved and thought to herself, 'surely this child would be just another body returned to me in a scroll.' Tsunade would not endure it again. She could not!

And so Tsunade allowed her brashness, her anger to guide her actions and lashed out; at sensei, at Jiraiya, and the damn village that had taken everything from her. And when she saw *that look* on boy's face, Tsunade felt something break inside her carefully, guarded heart and when the boy—when Minato—ran away. No, when he ran from *her*, she felt like a piece of her was dying all over again.

Tsunade had recoiled as if struck at the sight of Senju Minato fleeing the room—of running from her—that she was unable to do anything except suck in a breath before the panic settled over her thoughts.

The Uchiha brat spat something that was positively venomous and indecipherable before tearing out of the tower like his heels were on fire. Not half a moment later, the Uchiha teens were in pursuit, but not before the one with the bad hair-cut paused to impale the blonde with a glance brimming with such staggering disappointment.

Inwardly Tsunade prayed that no one else would say something because she already realized what an error she had made. Luck was not an aspect of Senju blood that favored Tsunade.

Namikaze's apprentice had stepped into her space for a moment but she did not dare meet the man's gaze. The straight-backed steel in the voice identified him an individual not to be trifled with, but it was a truly blood-curdling amount of killing intent directed solely at her that reminded Tsunade why Hatake Sakumo had been so terrifying. Sakumo's son did not disappoint either: for the first time in nearly a decade, Tsunade feared for her life.

"Those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash." Her

chin turned without her consent and she stared into the eye of the man that could very well offer a death sentence. "I know your story, Tsunade." The bold form of address was joined with an unpleasant snarl. "Let me give you a bit of friendly advice. I failed every person I truly cared for. They all died and I could do nothing. I'm the last person that has any business around that boy. I'm too broken and I'm a shell of the person I used to be, but I won't give up. I won't abandon him. If you walk away from the village and from my otouto, know that you will have made an enemy in me and you are no comrade to the leaf."

Tsunade made a jerky motion forward that was aborted when Jiraiya grabbed her again in a smooth, practiced motion. She wanted to scream at Hatake as he vanished in a swirl of leaves. She wanted to hit him so that she felt something other than the misery and the need to cry. But the man was just like her and had known pain just like her. Except he was stronger than her. Here she was, the strongest woman alive, and far weaker than that scarecrow who vowed vengeance and murder.

"What the fuck is your problem you stupid, old hag?!"

The name calling seemed to drag her out of her stupor and Tsunade is staring at Namikaze's brat who had appeared directly in front of her.

"Naruto!" She heard sensei choking and that had to be Uchiha Mikoto yelling at the boy.

"All Minato-chan has said about you is good things." Fugaku had appeared next to the blonde and was reaching for his shoulder only for the whiskered brat to shrug it off angrily and start yelling so loudly that Tsunade felt bits of spittle sticking to her bust. "You're supposed to be some amazing fighter, a medic, and a war hero. Some hero! Your family is dead and the first thing you do when you find out one of them is alive is…treat him like trash. That Kakashi-teme is right. You're abandoning your family! You're just a washed up old hag! I hate people like you! You never appreciate what you have! You never think about anyone but yourself!"

'It hurts too much to think about other people. What has love ever afforded me except pain?'

"Naruto-kun." This time Tsunade watched with a feeling of dread mixed with relief as the raging blonde was scooped up into the Uchiha Clan Head's arms. To her surprise, she noticed free flowing tears flowing down the tan face along with snot and other stuff. Nevertheless, the rigid man pressed the crying child's face to his shoulder. "I think it's high

time we have a discussion on our Clan's stance on associating with undesirable characters. Sandaime-sama, I'm taking my son home."

"Tou-san." The blonde boy wailed as he was carried from the office. "It's not fair! I hate her! It's not fair!"

"Hokage-sama, our home remains available for Minato-kun." Uchiha Mikoto bowed and turned toward her and raised a fist that shook menacingly. "I may not have your strength physically and I'm not Sannin, but I'm no pushover. Get your shit together or I'll make you wish you had."

Now Tsunade was sitting back in a chair, holding a mug that a worried Shizune had pressed into her numb hands, and ignored the worried looks from the three hovering individuals.

"Shizune-san, it's been a long night. Why don't you take Tonton and go relax?" She watched her sensei lifted a hand to stall the other woman's protests. "I know you care about Tsunade-chan, but you should know that Jiraiya and I would never intentionally cause her additional suffering and we care about her more than even Tsunade realizes."

Instead of making her feel better, the old man's statement compounded her misery and her headache pounded harder in her head. For so many years she had resented this man for sending the ones she loved on missions that they never returned from. And that same man that she cursed so regularly was here defending her.

"Tsunade-sama." Shizune was calling her. If there was one person left that Tsunade didn't want to let down, it was Shizune; she refocused on the slip-of-a-girl that was biting her lip and looking almost hesitant with a hand stretching toward her.

"It's alright, Shizune." It was really far from alright, but Tsunade was better with denial than truths anyway. She bit back the quaver in her voice and felt the skin in her palms tear from her fingernails. "I'll come find you in a little while. Go on."

Go enjoy this place before we leave. Go before we return to wandering from town to town. Go before I remember that you've given up your youth and your life to follow me around because…because I can't let go. And I don't know if I'll ever be ready.

"Do you remember the day your grandfather died?" The knob had barely clicked into place before the question was posed.

“How could I ever forget?” Tsunade replied crossly as she remembered the day her granduncle appeared with a group of faceless shinobi carrying the cold body of a man she loved. “It was the only time I ever saw my grandmother breakdown. She wept at times, but nothing like my grandfather’s death.”

“You’re not wrong.” Her sensei sat down next to her and she tensed up slightly before relaxing. “But I remember that day because of what your *father* said to me.”

Against her will, Tsunade found herself curious about her father, Senju Keito. The man had died only a few years after Nawaki was born and her memory of the man was fuzzy at best. It was strange that her a toddler’s memory of her laughing grandfather so thoroughly eclipsed a man that shared more meals, more days of early training, and more years with her. Tsunade had not thought about the brown haired, golden eyed man who crumbled when she pouted at him and saved all of his laughter for Nawaki alone. Tsunade remembered being upset when the man died, but her grief had given way to bitterness when she seemed to wear black more and more often and the list of dead Clan members grew until no one else was left. And her father was just another name on a slab of stone.

“I don’t remember much of him.” Tsunade spoke the words and felt grieved by the truth in them. “I just remember a parade of never-ending funerals. I remember when it was necessary for the Senju to have dozens of homes to accommodate all of our families. And I remember that it seemed each week there was one less person until everything was quiet and there was nothing except empty buildings left.”

Jiraiya squeezed her hand next to her but Tsunade watched the craggy lines of sensei’s brow pull together. The decline of the Senju was much like the fall of Uzushiogakure. The only difference was that the Uzumaki were wiped out in a single assault and were spared the horrifying, gradual death that claimed the entirety of the surviving Senju population.

“Your father was a skilled shinobi. Though never achieving the fame or success of his parents.” Something that she already knew, but did not bother pointing out. “But when I expressed my condolences about Hashirama-sama’s death, I’ll never forget what your father said to me. And I feel that now is the time for you to hear his words so that you might find comfort in them.”

How was she supposed to respond to that? Her father was basically a footnote on her life.

"What did he say?" Jiraiya asked for her. The man was more reliable than anyone and Tsunade silently thanked the man for making the inquiry.

"He told me that I had missed the point entirely." The Sandaime laughed aloud and his lips quirked upward bringing the aged face some renewed vigor. "Keito-san words to me were, 'My father died so that my Tsunade-chan might have a life. So, that our people have a life. I can't be selfish and wish for a different outcome when I know another course of action may cripple the next generation. There more than likely will come a day when I do not return from a mission. I do not fear my end because in death I may save more lives than just my own. My father could have lived, but he chose to believe that his life was not worth the cost of a thousand others. So don't be sorry that my father died, Sarutobi-san. My father died on his own terms and I can promise you he left this life smiling.' Your father's words stuck with me and I've never forgotten them in all these years."

"What good are the words of a dead man?" Tsunade snapped back, feeling like an animal pinned in a corner and not sure how to deal with the legacy of her father that was damning as hell.

"You are still alive, Tsunade."

It struck her like a pail of freezing water and she jolted upright.

Because I'm still alive?

"I know you're suffering, Tsunade. But you're not the only one who has lost people." Tsunade rubbed at her raw eyes with the back of her hand and bit back a sound. "And you have never had to truly be alone. As your mentor, I felt your suffering as if it were my own and felt helpless to ease your hurts. Even when you walked away from us, I supported you. I rationalized it by telling myself that you needed time to heal. But now, I see that I was selfish in allowing you to leave."

"I needed to leave." In fact, she was itching to start running as fast as she could in a direction that was anywhere but where she currently was.

“And that’s just it, Tsunade.” There was remorse infused in those words and a lone tear fell from the Kami of Shinobi’s eye before a mask of iron returned to the man’s face and his gaze rocked Tsunade to her very core. There was power there. And there was intent. “I love you like a daughter and I failed you because I let you run away from your pain instead of learning to manage your trauma. Your emotional growth has been stunted by your willfulness and my willingness to turn a blind eye.”

“I am the best medic in the world.” The sudden urge—no, the need to defend herself surged to the surface. “You think I wouldn’t know if something was wrong with me? I assure you, I’m in the best of health and any damage to my liver is mitigated by my own exceptional talents. I’m perfectly fine and— “

“Tsunade.” The air was suddenly choked by an influx of killing intent from next to her and her jaw dropped as she jerked around to stare at Jiraiya. Normally her greatest supporter, there was no glimpse of the goofy, pervert in residence today. The man was all business and he radiated danger and threat.

And every bit of it was directed at her.

“I’ve always been your greatest advocate because I understand what you’re going through.” Tsunade felt the urge to flee again but was pinned in place like a helpless butterfly. “But enough is enough. Sensei is right. Tsuna, it’s time for you to come home.”

“I can’t.” She choked, but it was more alarming to hear that she had not said an outright no. Oh Gods…what if her sensei was right all along? What if she *was* emotionally stunted?

“You will.” Jiraiya sounded fierce and radiated far more authority than Orochimaru ever dreamt of. “And I will stay here for as long as it takes.”

“Jiraiya.” Sarutobi interjected warningly but Jiraiya batted away the old man’s protest like one might swat a fly.

“If you want Tsunade to come home, my spy network can be left unattended for a while.” Jiraiya grabbed her by the wrists and dragged her upward which she followed—since she didn’t exactly have a choice—only feeling slightly shaky. “Now, we’re going to go see that kid that you blew off.”

“I can’t!” Her fear was back, rearing with the same potency

as her fear of blood.

"You can." Jiraiya smirked and she jumped when the man began rubbing circles on the back of her hands. "I know how much your family meant to you. And you have two children of your blood that need you now. Although I'll wager Kushina's brat is going to be a tricky one to mend fences with."

"Little brat called me old." Tsunade lips twitched and her sore eyes burned again and she closed them and watched the parade of fallen shades parade through her mind. "I don't know if my heart is in this, Jiraiya. I've heard what you and sensei have said and I understand, but I just don't think I can be this person you want me to be. I'm not even the person my father would have wanted me to be. She doesn't exist anymore."

"Of course, not." Jiraiya's seriousness *again* caught her off-guard. "Every experience and every loss remakes us anew into something different. But you're also wrong. You're still Senju Tsunade, you're just an evolved incarnation of her."

"I hope you're not implying anything." Using humor was just another delay tactic. Jiraiya knew it. She knew it. Sensei knew it. The world hated her.

"Never, Hime." Jiraiya's brows waggled suggestively but the lines around the man's mouth remained firm and the hands clasping hers never strayed. "But I'm going to take you out to see that brat and than I'll take you for some sake at one of my favorite haunts."

"I still haven't agreed to anything." Tsunade regained some of herself and straightened.

"But you will." Sarutobi-sensei's words were light and carried a measure of threat that Tsunade understood was all too real. And she felt…relieved. How did that even make sense? "Go see the boy now, but I expect you both back hear to discuss terms of a new agreement before midnight. Senju Minato will remain in the custody of the Uchiha Clan until further notice."

Tsunade made an aggrieved sound and scowled at the look shared between the two conspiring men and folded her arms. So, what if it rankled her a little that her Clan's old enemies were caring for the boy? It didn't mean anything.

“Tsunade, do you regret meeting Dan?”

“How could you ask me such a thing?” Lashing out quickly, she was half-aware of the scramble of ANBU, the movement of Sarutobi, and the delicious groan of wood bending and shattering in a million shards of wood until little remained but splinters.

“Do you?” The old man looked calculatingly at her while she panted and the ANBU retreated with a deliberate show of reluctance, their masked faces boring a hole into her front.

“Of course, not!” Now she was just frustrated, angry, and grieved. “He was the love of my life! I would have died for him! I would have traded places in a heartbeat if I could have!”

“Would Dan recognize you?”

She jerked backward as if slapped.

“You’re blackmailing me.” The fight drained from her and she could already picture the disappointed look on Dan’s face if he could see her now.

“No, Tsunade.” The Sandaime frowned. “I’m reminding you that someone you esteemed above all others would want you to be happy.”

“Jiraiya…let’s just go get this farce over with.” Tsunade glared at the floor. “Hatake is going to try and off me.”

“That kid is all bark and no bite.” Jiraiya dismissed her concerns far too casually considering the amount of killing intent that kid had projected.

“Isn’t he one of the village’s top assassination experts?”

“Relax!” Some of Jiraiya’s infectious bravado leeched into his mood and the man moved with a bit of swagger in his steps. “You’re one of the Sannin! You could knock him down with a single flick of your beautiful fingers.”

It was poorly executed, cheesy, and definitely should *not* have made her feel better: except it did. Already Tsunade could feel her spirits lift.

“I am one of the Sannin.”

I am one of the Sannin. My comrades and I levelled battlefields and obliterated battalions. And maybe, just maybe, Sarutobi-sensei was not wrong about everything. All I've ever done is run away from the fear of my past and the memories I have. Dan may see a physical resemblance, but he would not recognize the bitter, old woman I've become. Kushina's son might have been on to something. I really have been behaving like an old woman.

I won't survive another loss…but maybe it's time to try again.

Before Tsunade had time to mull the matter over, Jiraiya had slipped his arm around her and away they went with a whoosh of chakra. Instantly she blinked as her eyes automatically began adjusting to moonlight instead of artificial office light and it took all of two seconds to recognize the wind currents, lack of immediate buildings, and the view. It *would* have to be her grandfather's effigy they landed on.

And a credit to Jiraiya's prowess as a spymaster, Tsunade only had to turn around to see the monuments other occupants. Senju Minato was curled up in the Hatake boy's arms looking drowsy, but curious. Hatake Kakashi looked uncomfortable and refrained from offering a greeting, but instead kept his eyes trained on where she stood like an overprotective guard dog. Beyond the little duo, the youngest Uchiha was engaged with a snit with his own brother and there was some furious whispering going on that Tsunade was thankful she could not here.

This was not going to be easy. And she had never had the best rapport with children. What was she even doing here?

If only I could disappear without hating myself more than I already do…

"Look kid," She glanced around helplessly, finding only reserved observation in the older Uchiha children, utter murder in the youngest, and a neutral but analytical look on Minato's face that reminded her entirely too much of Tobirama-oji. How did people start conversations like these anyways? And apologies were…by policy, something she never gave out. Ever.

What am I supposed to say? If Dan were here…he would know what to do. Even Orochimaru would be more help than that useless pervert I'm saddled with. And why in the hell did I even agree to do this?! Oh right, I didn't!

Apparently brooding had its benefits because a second later, she felt a hand tug one of her own sharply and she stared down at the Senju child staring up at her with such compassion that Tsunade felt worse than when she had arrived.

"I know you're sorry." The child spoke gently her body betrayed her with yet another fit of trembling; truly, Tsunade loathed herself for her weaknesses more than anyone else possibly could. She needed to get out of here. "And I can tell you're probably afraid and this is all probably a lot to take in. And that's okay. I forgive you and…when you're ready, we can get to know each other. Okay?"

And finally, the voice in her head finally went blessedly *silent.* And the absence brought with it a dose of clarity that had been missing for the entirety of the evening.

A second later, a set of arms wrapped around her upper thighs in a gesture entirely platonic and full of life. With a sob and a returning headache, Tsunade dropped down and hugged the tiny boy for all she was worth. *This* was what sensei had been talking about. There was a rush of euphoria and a moment where her sorrows—while not forgotten—were lessened and her heart beat and she felt something that was warmth tempered with bittersweet memory.

This boy was something she had lost and finding it again was the most painful thing in the world. Because rediscovering who she was felt like agony, loss, and tremulous joy.

Minato returned her embrace and didn't complain even though he must have had difficulty breathing from how tightly she was holding him. It seemed impossible to let go though and Tsunade cried from a feeling of overwhelming relief.

"It's okay to cry." That small voice said in her ear. "Coming home is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

How could someone so small understand so much? Tsunade held the boy tighter and let the tears fall. This time, instead of a profound sorrow, she felt like she was healing the places even her greatest medical techniques had failed to reach.

Father, I'm ready to try again. I think…one more time. I can try one more time.

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Jiraiya needed a drink followed by a high-stress afternoon of peeking to calm his aching nerves. This rollercoaster ride of highs and lows was becoming far too much of a strain.

Tsunade had reconciled with her newest family member and that had been a humbling moment when it felt like mortality was held at bay by a flesh and blood miracle. There was a moment when the little tyke looked a few shades away from suffocation in Tsunade's bosom, and oh what a beautiful death that would be! Despite the mystery surrounding Senju Minato, Jiraiya would be forever thankful to the boy for existing because of what the boy had done for the woman he loved. Jiraiya had witnessed Tsunade's entire being transform when that child wrapped his skinny arms around her. Golden brown eyes had suddenly flooded with the bewitching wonder of a mother gazing upon her first child and succumbing to that unconditional terms of love.

Jiraiya knew this was just the first step. Tsunade had a long way to go before she would be alright again, but she could see that spark that had been missing from Hime's eyes. Things were looking up!

Jiraiya was no fool contrary to the persona he wore in front of the majority of the populace. Sensei would be assigning Tsunade to someone with mental health experience. No doubt one of the more talented members of the Yamanaka or god help them, a Nara mental health professional. Obviously getting Tsunade to attend these meetings would be a real bitch, but Jiraiya had some ideas. And if all else failed, Tsunade never had been able to resist a good bet.

Either way, decades of drinking and addiction were going to be there own challenge on top of problems that had been with the woman since birth. The next several weeks were not going to be enjoyable for Jiraiya. Or sensei. Or the poor sod they assigned as Tsunade's therapist.

And yet…glancing over to where Hatake Kakashi was standing next to the Uchiha boys—the youngest looking like he had swallowed a lemon, Jiraiya felt another battlefront had been overlooked. Or perhaps it would be more apt to assume that another battle had been created. Because he might not know Kakashi the way he had known Sakumo, but Jiraiya knew that face.

Therapy was going to be easy marbles, the greatest hurdle that Hime had was going to be Hatake Kakashi.

Sidling over to where the group was standing, Jiraiya waved a gauntleted hand to the group. The Uchiha brat huffed and tried to look tough and ignore his presence altogether.

"Jiraiya-sama." The formality came from the Uchiha heir and was impossibly polite but even Jiraiya could not get a good read on the boy.

"I'm surprised you guys didn't head on home." Jiraiya rubbed the back of his head. "Pretty sure your parents took Naruto home with them. I'm surprised you guys didn't follow suit."

The older boy scoffed and folded his arms in almost a mirrored pose of the younger boy.

"Sasuke-chan was worried."

"With good reason." The small Uchiha snapped again and glared unforgivingly at Tsunade's back where the pair were still hugging and exchanging a few words.

"I'm proud of my otouto's care for his friends." Uchiha Itachi spoke without any inflection clinging to his voice and Jiraiya pondered whether it would be wise to try and borrow the Uchiha for reconnaissance work. With a little polish and corrupting influence that kid would be gold. "But Sasuke needs to remember that reality is rarely so simple. We must look beyond the obvious fallacies if— "

"Itachi, Sasuke is almost five, but that means he only thinks like a five-year old and isn't all ancient and mysterious like you." The older Uchiha actually quirked a grin and Jiraiya's brows surged upward. "That also means he is supposed to be bratty."

Jiraiya watched the Uchiha squirt try and assault the Uchiha teen only for the small boy to end up in a headlock. Chuckling softly, he turned again to the look on Kakashi's face. The resentment did not seem quite so strong but there was definitely backbone in that kid.

"What are you planning?" He deliberately kept his voice hushed to prevent the words from carrying to where Tsunade stood.

"Hmm, I wonder about that." Kakashi murmured mysteriously. "Shisui."

The boy snapped to sudden attention, hefting a wriggling

Sasuke upright with him, and Jiraiya wondered if ANBU had snapped the boy up already. It was hardly unheard of, but the age was rare in Konoha.

"Yes?"

"I have something I need to do. Make sure Minato gets back to the Uchiha Compound safely."

"We will." The answer came from the smallest Uchiha and that seemed to give the Hatake pause. The masked man walked over and ruffled Sasuke's hair with one hand.

"Thank you, Sasuke."

With that, Hatake Kakashi vanished from sight and Jiraiya was left pondering the cryptic exchange. His information was too incomplete to form any conclusions, but there was one thing that Jiraiya was absolutely certain of.

Hatake Kakashi was going to be trouble.

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Kakashi longed to put his ANBU mask on, but the sooner he confronted his fears the quicker this would be over. The door opened with a squeak and the light stretched indoors to showcase dusty floors and the glow of beady red eyes that quickly scurried out of sight. The indoors were little better with drops of moisture falling from a roof that had seen better days. The windows appeared to have lost their shutters some years prior and the furniture reeked of mildew.

Kakashi ignored all of this and walked down the hallway, ignoring sagging floorboards, and pushed open the door to his father's bedroom. The room itself had the basic furnishings but was devoid of any personal items that Kakashi himself had removed before sealing the place up and leaving all those years ago. Thankfully the stench of death had long since departed and even the stains had been scrubbed away, but Kakashi fell to his knees in the exact spot he had done so the last time he set foot in the Hatake Clan Compound.

"Tou-san, it's been a long time." Kakashi closed his eyes, lost in thought. "I've been bitter about your death for a long time. I had convinced myself I hated you, but that was never the problem. The problem was that I loved you so much that I had trouble understanding how you could choose your comrades over the mission, but you couldn't choose me over the villager's hate. But I think I understand now."

Reaching out, Kakashi touched the spot where his father's head had rested for the final time. Just barely noticeable, wedged in a crack in the floor was a silver, wiry hair. Plucking it, he lifted it to his masked nose and breathed in a scent that wasn't and imagined his father's face before the world had turned on him.

"I love you, tou-san." Kakashi let the single hair fall back to the floor. "And I forgive you."

Kakashi stood slowly and retreated from his father's old room. The ends of his nose quivered as a minty scent infiltrated the outskirts of the home and Kakashi slipped outside into the cover of darkness where a masked companion stood stiff and looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"Taichou!" The man offered a snappy salute and shifted cagily. Kakashi felt a rare smile form on his face. No doubt his kohai anticipated some sort of evening exercise or training scenario. It would not be out of character for Kakashi to make such a demand.

“Remove your mask, you won’t need it.” Kakashi ordered.

Tentatively, an overly place face framed by spiky brown bangs peered back at him. Truthfully Kakashi was starting to think he was going to have to order the other man to spend a little more time in the sun in order to prevent Tenzo turning into a wraith.

“Tenzo, I’ve asked you here for a mission that only you are capable of undertaking.” Kakashi chose his words with care and was pleased when the armored man relaxed and all semblance of anxiety bled out of the man’s larger frame.

“Your orders?” Definitely more at ease now that he was under the impression he would be sent on some A to S-rank mission that they inevitably always performed together. Countless near death experiences tended to bring people closer together after all.

“The mission is urgent and requires your complete attention.” Kakashi actually found himself almost giddy with enjoyment. It had been quite a while since he felt so light. “Are you prepared?”

“I’m prepared, Taichou. What are my orders?” Tenzo was such a rigid man. Not that Kakashi really had room to talk, but the man really needed to lighten up a little.

“Your mission is to repair this residence to the best of your ability.” Okay, he might be getting off on the stupefied look on Tenzo’s face. Maybe he needed to mess with the man more often. You know, in the spirit of team work. Obito would probably have approved. “Or just demolish it and build a new one from scratch. Whatever you think works best.”

“My mission is to build a new house?” Tenzo did not bother hiding his dubious expression.

There was no way he could blame the man for looking doubtful.

“When have you ever known me to make jokes?” Kakashi asked seriously, but really, he was feeling more light the longer this continued. “But make sure you do your best work. After all, your Taichou deserves a nice place to put up his feet.”

“Wait, this is *your* house?” Tenzo asked, looking around with a disappointed look on his face. “This place is such a dump!”

“It tends to happen when you haven’t been around in over ten years.” Kakashi scratched the edge of his masked face. “But you see now why only *you* can handle this mission. Of all my comrades, I feel you are the only person I can trust with building a home for my younger brother.”

If Kakashi were not familiar with Tenzo’s micro-expressions, he might have missed the cheeks soften a hair and the creepiness slip away from the expressionless eyes before the man crossed his arms and glowered his direction.

“And I’m sure my Mokuton had nothing to do with that?” Tenzo looked so suspicious and it was funny because of how justified it really was.

“Well, it was you or Gai and while I’m sure Gai would have agreed— “

“Right, say no more.” Tenzo’s mood drooped along with his face before the man clapped his hands together and gestured to the moss-covered roof. “This place is a mess, sempai. It might be better to bury it with a few doton jutsus.”

“Do whatever it takes.” Kakashi turned away from his residence of birth and clapped Tenzo on the shoulder, causing the man to shriek in a high-pitched way reminiscent of yowling cats. Kakashi grimaced and contemplated how best to punish the man’s feline behavior. “And Tenzo, don’t forget to furnish the place! What is a house without furniture?”

“Furnishings!” Tenzo shrieked.

Kakashi bounded over the property fence and waved jauntily. “I told you this was a mission only *you* could handle. Don’t let me down!”

Kakashi walked away having said his goodbyes and thinking about the resignation paperwork he would have to start piecing together if he was going to go through with his plan. Tsunade was a wildcard at this juncture and he could not afford to rely on her, but her choices were of little consequence to him. Kakashi needed to get out of ANBU if he wanted any chance of being involved in Minato’s upbringing.

And if that went well, then perhaps he could have some sort of relationship with Naruto too. And maybe than, when he eventually

passed on, he could meet Rin, Obito, and his sensei with a clear conscience.

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Just outside Suna…

Waves of sand rose and fell in a constantly moving ocean of golden particles. Dunes rose and fell with unnatural swiftness until the entire surrounding area was nothing except a sea of bubbling sand. No surface remained placid; the wind breathed gritty granules into the air and the arid terrain made drawing oxygen into the lungs a trying task for the hardiest desert dweller. This was particularly true for the heaving child running from the maws of desert sand that threatened to swallow the small boy if he stopped his perilous journey up and down the changing landscape.

'Faster!'

Gaara picked up the pace and ignored the strain in his muscles, dodged slithering tails of hardened sand that licked at his sandaled heels, and desperately gulped in another lungful of air.

'Pathetic!' Gaara panted and upped his movements, even if he barely scampered aside when the sand beneath his feet gave way.

Running was a new thing. Really all of this was new. But Gaara was not going to disappoint his new friend. With a bit of renewed vigor and no small amount of luck, he flipped over the next slithery wave of sand and landed with only a tiny wobble and shot forward.

'That's more like it!' The voice within him crowed triumphantly and Gaara warmed inside. Around him, the sand's motions subsided and reverted to stillness and the sweating boy raced over to the container of water.

'So, do you think I'm getting better?' Gaara was eager and hopeful. Shukaku-sama was hard to please, but at least Gaara *could* please him. No one else wanted anything to do with him except Yashamaru and the man was rarely around anyway.

'Don't go thinking you're all tough now.' Shukaku's chortled in his ear and Gaara's heart sank. **'But compared to the rest of these weaklings, you're alright.'**
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Gaara smiled broadly and greedily guzzled the remainder of the first thermos of water. The cool liquid was heaven on his parched throat.

'Thank you, Shukaku.' Gaara responded shyly.

'It's gonna take a lot more work, but we are going to be the nastiest, baddest duo around! When I'm done training you, we are going to crush anyone who tries to kill us into tiny pieces and than we'll show that damn fox and his container exactly who the top bijuu is! Kehehehe!"

'What fox?'

'That pesky older brother of mine.' Shukaku's laughter bounced through his ears with potent ferocity causing the redhead to wince. Still, he was far from complaining since the creepy whisperings had vanished nearly a month ago, leaving his mind quiet for the first time in his life. When Gaara had heard Shukaku's voice again last week, he had not expected the ferocious command to start training and the beginning of regular, cordial discussions. Gaara liked it better than being alone. Anything was better than that.

'Oh.' Gaara mulled it over. *'My aniki is afraid of me.'*

'Ooh good idea…we'll make that fox afraid of us!'

Gaara sighed. Sometimes communication with his companion was difficult and sometimes he suspected that Shukaku misunderstood what he was trying to say. But Gaara did not mind too much since the voice had acknowledged him and treated him better than other people did.

'Ugh…I smell that rotten man again.' Shukaku complained.

"Gaara, come here." The command came and the redhead turned and blinked at his father who was attired in his robes of office, though the hat was missing. Not particularly wanting to, he turned and grudgingly made his way toward the man. The sand at his feet rustled wearily and he wondered if this…was the moment when the other man tried to end his existence: again.

"Yashamaru tells me that you've been sleeping."

Gaara nodded curtly and tugged the hem of his shirt.

“Explain how this is possible.”

Gaara frowned and debated before finally answering. “Shukaku told me my chakra reserves and training would be hampered by lack of rest…so now I sleep.”

Mostly he slept during the day and trained after nightfall to avoid the constant glares, but this proved difficult at times.

“You’re controlling the beast?” There was something unreadable that Gaara had difficulty defining in his father’s visage.

‘Ha. What a raving loon.’ Shukaku chirped. **‘As if you could control my power without my help.’**

“No.” Gaara puzzled out exactly how he should describe his relationship with the oversized raccoon before deciding that only one term fit with all of his evidence. “Shukaku is my friend now. We’re working together.”

Gaara was not quite sure how to react when his father choked and made a face like a fish and Shukaku chortled in a bizarre manner.

Gaara didn’t care though. Shukaku was odd, but Shukaku was his first friend.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter took a bit of wrestling to get it just the way I wanted it.

Um so...a lot of you have been waiting for this Tsunade encounter. I hope I didn't disappoint and I hope you're happy with how it played out.

I really love you guys! I hope to hear from you all! Have a great weekend!

BUT! The amazingly talented Samsara made a beautiful piece of fanart for the story! Be sure to check it out here: http://samsararen.deviantart.com/art/By-The-Will-of-Fire-657634497 Thanks again for such an amazing picture! Definitely excited and it's now my desktop background.

Chapter 10: Family Matters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air nipped at his skin in the pre-dawn chill where Minato allowed his feet to dangle over the side of the house. The only sound that disturbed the quiet was the occasional croak of a toad and the serenade of crickets among the grass.

Escaping the bedroom without rousing either Itachi or Shisui had required every ounce of Minato's skill to pass unchallenged, but he had been determined to get some fresh air without the perpetual chaperone. Even as a Hokage, life had never felt this stifling! Perhaps it would have felt different if Minato had not been aware, but with his sensory talent there was little chance to pretend he was not cognizant of the constant surveillance.

The past few days had taken a toll mentally and even a few minutes enjoying fresh air away from the chaos was helpful. Sasuke and Naruto had not gotten over Tsunade's behavior in the Hokage's office and this showed by their loud and heavily slanted opinions whenever the Sannin was mentioned. Kakashi's behavior had been even more distressing than his friend's grumblings: the copy-nin pretended everything was fine when Minato knew it definitely was not fine. Shisui and Itachi had been rather tight-lipped, but that was preferable to Fugaku's mutterings and Mikoto's pensive silence.

The worst day had been Minato's seal examination by Jiraiya. That…had been the first instance that Minato feared any chance of keeping secrets would be compromised. The toad sage had poked and prodded at the inky designs while Tsunade conducted her own medical exams—no doubt aiming to confirm the ANBU medic's assertion. All of this happened while the Sandaime smoked his pipe and Kakashi sat next to him. Much to Minato's misfortune, Jiraiya had studied the inky spirals with a frown all the while making notes on his paper. Eventually the Sandaime had excused him with some bogus comment, while the *adults* discussed their findings.

Minato could not be sure of what Jiraiya saw, but he knew that his former mentor was exceptionally gifted with seals even if Minato had eventually surpassed his mentor. There were several underlying possibilities, but Minato was certain that Jiraiya sensed

something amiss.

"The seal isn't fake." Kurama rumbled from inside.

'I know, but he definitely knows something is unusual about the seal itself. The best-case scenario is that Jiraiya decides that your chakra mingles with mine much more evenly than the seal I placed on Naruto.'

'What would they do if they find out that you and I have a more amicable relationship?'

'If this were Kumo, they would throw me a party and leave it at that.'

'Be glad this isn't Kumo. You heard Gyuki's jinchuuriki rapping didn't you? I refuse to be inundated with morons.'

'I suspect you would try to eat me if I were foolish enough to do something like that.'

'Eviscerate. I'm uninterested in consuming spoiled goods.'

'Considering how shaky my background is, I think there is a good chance that ANBU would be assigned to me permanently if they worked out my history. Unfortunately, that's a best-case scenario.'

'Will they try to imprison you?'

'With Jiraiya here, they could easily reseal you into a new host that has fewer question marks on their history.'

'They wouldn't dare. You are too high-profile now to just disappear without a trace. And I doubt Kakashi or Tsunade would sit back and let them kill you.'

'Don't underestimate Hiruzen. Danzo is often considered the one with bloody hands, but it's not always been the case. Hiruzen is not as clean as everyone imagines him to be. He just conceals it better. I rather imagine the tendency to underestimate the Sandaime has been the old man's greatest strength.'

'I hardly consider Orochimaru evidence of the man's cold-hearted nature that you speak of.'

'Maybe.' Minato hesitated, clearly torn. 'But sometimes I wonder if there is more to that story than we know.'

'You need to start training again.'

'I know that I do, but why are you so concerned all of the sudden?'

'Your body isn't strong enough for me to intervene with anything beyond healing factor and minor enhancements to speed. If Konoha were to move against you, I would be unable to assist at this time.'

The downsides to time travel and being a younger jinchuuriki.' The bijuu was right though. After this mess with Kakashi and Tsunade settled, he really needed to step things up. 'I'll come up with some plausible explanation that actually fits with the evidence without completely screwing us.'

'I know that tone of voice…what is it you want?'

'I know you're concerned about the risks, but you need to reach out to more of your siblings.'

'No.'

'The more prepared we are, the better are odds against Madara. And I don't think the Nidaime will be able to rig up a miracle more than once.'

'I don't like this.'

'Neither do I, but I have to get stronger to protect Naruto. And to protect you, Kurama. It's only fair that you give some of your siblings a chance.' It was a low blow to bring up protective urges, but desperate times called for underhanded measures.

'I'll reach out to Choumei again.' *Reluctance stained every word, but there was not any rebuttal.* **'And perhaps Kokuo or Saiken, but that's as far as I'm willing to budge.'**

'What about Matatabi?' Minato persisted.

'I'll think about it. And maybe, in a few years, I'll reconsider.'

It wasn't a no and that by itself was more than he had the right to ask for.

A false wind brushed stray strands of hair into his face, but

Minato made no effort to push them away as Kakashi landed soundlessly behind him.

"You're really quiet, nii-san." Minato tossed out the compliment before letting himself fall backward with a whoosh. The roof tiles were frigid at this time of night and Kakashi's sandals were not the most comfortable headrest, so he wrapped his skinny arms around himself for additional warmth.

"Not quiet enough if you can sense me." There was a rueful tinge and Minato can almost hear the embarrassment clinging to the words. "That sensory skill of yours must be really powerful if you're able to sense suppressed targets."

Now that was new information. Minato felt his face pull as his brother dropped down next to him. "I heard that Tobirama had an excellent sensory talent."

"That's what they say." Kakashi tapped his masked chin thoughtfully, but cryptically did not pursue the matter.

"But what are you doing up so late?" The copy-nin cast a meaningful glance around the rooftop. "You shouldn't be outside by yourself in the middle of the night."

"I wanted to be alone." There was a tug and he was tucked under a wiry arm and enabled to steal some warmth from Kakashi. "And I was thinking about yesterday. I get the feeling it didn't go very well."

"Why do you think that?" And there was the elusive tug of an ANBU captain quietly fishing for information.

"Jiraiya-sama kept grunting and making faces like someone that really needs to use the bathroom." It was the truth flavored with a dollop of Naruto's flair that made Kakashi snort. "And Tsunade didn't hit him so it must have been important."

The quiet came accompanied by petting from Kakashi that Minato suspected was much the way his brother stroked his dogs. There were worse comparisons to be made and if a little canine experience helped Kakashi's confidence, than it was alright with him.

"Aa, that might be so." Even if it felt purposefully vague, there was solace to be taken from the fact that his brother had not lied.

“Did I do anything wrong?” He asked more from a desire to hear Kakashi’s reply than actual curiosity.

“No.” Kakashi squeezed him again and Minato was thankful he had bijuu chakra to ease the aches on his ribs that the other man was unaware he was leaving. “But the seal around a bijuu is important not just for the safety of those around you, but for yourself. Jiraiya-sama may want to take another look, but I promise that I’ll be there too.”

“Because of your Sharingan.” The words escaped of their own accord and Kakashi had frozen against his side again.

“Why would you say that?” No one could mistake Kakashi’s words for casual this time.

“Shisui was with me that first day with his Sharingan. And Fugaku never stops complaining about you.” Instantly he could tell the other man felt more at ease by the return of his ability to breathe properly. “It wasn’t hard to piece together after that.”

“You’re pretty sharp, pup.” Kakashi rubbed his head with another round of affection. “Guess we must be related after all.”

“You’re stuck with me.” He affirmed.

“So…I might have got a new place in the works. How would you feel about moving in with me?”

There was a significant bit of Minato that wanted to tease the other man for the unintentional innuendo, but figured a four-year old would not be able to reason away how he knew about those comments. Sometimes being young was such a drag. On the other hand, Minato had sensed this moment coming and knew making light of it would not do him any favors.

“Can I still see my friends?” He already knew what the answer would be, but he had to keep up appearances. And it was rather entertaining to watch Kakashi pretend to think the matter over.

“I suppose so, but only if Naruto agrees not to prank the house or it’s occupants.” Kakashi replied with mock-seriousness—though Minato privately thought that was a good rule.

“Okay.”

“Hmm?”

“I said—“ Minato dragged out emphasis. “Okay!”

Before he knew it, he was swung into the air and crushed against a chest. With a long-suffering sigh, Minato returned the hug and definitely did not snuggle closer and purr when the hair stroking began.

“You’re not allowed to be like a cat.” Kakashi chided him gently, but continued his ministrations. “The pack would be so disappointed.”

“Can’t help it.” Minato mumbled drowsily. “I heard the Nidaime had feline summons. Probably makes me a hybrid or something.”

“Maybe it can’t be helped then.”

“Yep.”

“Nii-san?”

“Aa?”

“I know you don’t want to, but I want you to try to forgive Tsunade. People hurt in different ways.”

There was a definite pause.

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.”

There was a rough bit of motion and they reappeared inside the bedroom where Naruto was halfway to falling off the bed and Sasuke somehow had wrapped his body around all three pillows like a territorial starfish. Itachi was sitting up in bed in a meditative pose and merely blinked as they arrived.

“Sorry, Itachi.” Minato apologized as Kakashi deposited him in the middle of the boys and snatched a pillow away from Sasuke’s grabby hands before offering it to the thankful Senju boy. Minato instantly snuggled into the cushion and retrieved his stuffed pup from under Naruto’s elbow, not missing Kakashi’s lone eye tracking his motions.

"Thank you, Hatake-san." Itachi was already lowering himself back into bed. "I have to be up early."

"Oh right." Kakashi remarked conversationally right over Shisui's quiet snores. "You're the one crazy enough to willingly train with Gai. How's that going for you?"

"Youthfully." The word was tacked on with a bit of a mocking wave. "Goodnight, Hatake-san."

"Ah." The hand brushed over his head again and tugged the blanket more firmly under Minato's chin. "Goodnight, pup."

"I love you, nii-san." The words came because Kakashi needed to hear them sometimes. And perhaps Minato needed to say something.

"You too, pup."

Minato was nearly asleep when Kurama's words pulled him from sleep.

'I may have a solution to our Jiraiya problem.'

'What is it?' Minato asked sleepily.

'You aren't going to like it.' *The bijuu stalled cagily and that had the former Kage sitting upright in his mind space staring at the false stars in the night sky*. **'But it will work just fine.'**

'Tell me.'

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Minato was waiting by the gate to the Uchiha Compound dressed in an overly elaborate kimono that Mikoto had foisted upon him for the occasion—Minato had been bribed into submission by an extra long hair brushing session. Shisui was next to him twitching every few seconds from the effort to remain still. Good Kami, what had that boy eaten for breakfast this morning?

"Tsunade-sama is taking you to lunch. That should be fun."
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Shisui forced a smile that looked closer to a grimace.

"Yep." Minato flashed a smile at a slightly rotund Uchiha female, approaching from the direction of the main market, with bursting bags. "Good morning, Uchiha-san!"

"Ah good morning Senju-chan." A finger clucked him under the chin and followed up with a firm pat to his hair—thankfully it was neatly swept up in a ponytail to keep it out of his face. "You bring Mikoto's boys around for some treats at my house sometime next week, you hear?"

"I will." Minato promised the old widow who patted him again, shot a grimacing Shisui a long look at his hair, and finally tottered past them down the lane.

"It's growing." Minato tried to reassure the pouting youth. "It's just going to take a few more weeks before it looks normal."

"More Uchiha you mean." Shisui bemoans sourly. "It could be anything, but no, the Uchiha have to take pride in their hair."

"I thought dojutsu was the Clan Pride." Minato remarked with a smirk. Sometimes it was just too easy to mess with young people.

"Bah, that's only the Uchiha that are shinobi." Shisui stretched his arms over his head and, to Minato's internal amusement, performed a series of squats. "But all of us have terrifically amazing hair. It's either smooth and ultra silky. Or a textured pattern of spikes that is the envy of friend and foe alike. And we keep it soft with…"

Shisui's words trailed off and Minato guessed the other boy had noticed the slight glazed look to his eyes.

"You alright, little silver?"

"Yeah, I was just wondering if you should consider a career in haircare product sales." The insult bounced off of Shisui's thick head before the older boy shot up from a squat and waved his arms rapidly.

"What?! Why would you even say that?!"

"No one is that zealous about their hair unless they've a real passion for the topic." Teasing Shisui was hardly a challenge, but

there was gratification to be had in watching the boy's jaw open and close with only a slight squawk. "You could always learn to cut hair if the styling thing is more your thing, but you seem to have the charisma for stage-acting."

"Stage acting?" Shisui mumbled to himself.

There was a suspicious flicker of two extremely familiar chakra patterns creeping closer and higher.

"I think Sasuke and Naruto are trailing us." Minato lazily tipped his head in the general direction of the duo. "Mikoto-sama isn't going to be happy either because they always end up with roof dust all over their clothes when they're trying to be sneaky."

"Yeah, I don't want to know." Shisui groused. "Sasuke used to be a brat, but now Naruto is teaching him to be clever *and* more bratty." There was a superior waggle to the older boy's fingers as he nodded to the creeping pair subtly. "I blame you."

"That seems a bit unfair." Closing his eyes, he concentrated for a second and scanned the nearby terrain. Tsunade's churning signature was just around the block. Perfect timing indeed. "But imagine if they prank Tsunade. I'm not going to be blamed and those boys are rather good at hiding. I guess that leaves you as the scapegoat to whatever those two are up to."

"That is…" Shisui spluttered.

"Yes?" Minato grinned.

"You're going to drive any jounin sensei nuts. You do know that, right?" Shisui shaded his eyes with a hand and lifted his hands to form a seal.

"If an instructor is displeased by the intelligence of his students, perhaps they should not be teaching." Minato countered a little bit more harshly than he intended and it showed in the sudden confusion in Shisui's eyes. Crap. What could he say to smooth that out better? "Wouldn't you be pleased if you had students that wanted your attention?"

"Eh, I suppose, but I doubt I really have the disposition to teach." There was a whoosh and a flash of chakra before Shisui reappeared on the roof with one of Minato's squirming friends under each arm. "He's all yours Tsunade-sama! If you can have him back

before dinner, Mikoto-sama would appreciate that. Minato is attending an engagement with the Nara Family tonight!"

"Put us down!" Naruto screamed, only for his pleas to be cut short as Shisui raced away with him.

Twisting limberly, Minato hopped over to where an amused pair of women were watching the antics of the two boys. There had been two supervised visits between Minato and Tsunade in the past week, but today would be their first day without Kakashi, Jiraiya, or the Hokage present. During the prior interactions, Minato had evaluated how stilted and tense some of Tsunade's reactions were, but the woman always warmed about after a few minutes. From his perspective as a former Kage, Minato assumed Tsunade was dealing with symptoms of post-traumatic stress so he would do everything in his power to assist in Tsunade's recovery; Minato would treat her with kindness, respect, and with all the diplomatic finagling he was forced to use in his previous life.

After all, Tsunade *was* related to Kushina, albeit distantly. And now Minato was related to Tsunade, his dead wife's relative. And that was going to lead down a convoluted road of thought liable to make him sick to his stomach.

Carefully gauging his behavior to prevent making the older woman uncomfortable, Minato approached Tsunade. There would be no bubbly exuberance that Naruto would have favored; nor could he behave reserved and distantly polite like Sasuke would have been. Going with his gut, the Senju child simply stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her waist.

As expected, he felt the woman tense. Minato waited patiently and, to her credit, Tsunade recovered quickly and scooped him up in a heartfelt embrace that forcibly expelled the air from his lungs.

"Have you stayed out of trouble?"

Exaggerating a sigh, he peeked up at the golden eyes that had softened remarkably. "Hardly. Naruto painted the back fence with luminescent paint that lights up at night. Fugaku-sama will be most displeased when he takes an evening stroll one of these days, but this should delay discovery for a little while."

"Where did he get his hands-on paint like that?" Shizune asked from the side looking alternately curious and elated as she

stared at Tsunade intently. Vaguely, Minato recalled hearing some details about Shizune's early life, but he had only exchanged a greeting with her once before. Shizune watched Tsunade like a mother watches her child. What a backward relationship those two must have.

"I wish I knew." Minato replied in a state of miserable confusion. Minato had spent a significant amount of time with Naruto and it still eluded him as to how Naruto gathered supplies. It was starting to feel like a conspiracy. Nevertheless, he mustered a smile for the apprentice clutching the pig awkwardly and offered the woman a polite nod. "Good morning."

"I suppose it might be best to introduce you since Shizune will be as involved in your life as she is in mine." Minato watched Tsunade's eyes light up at the potential implications of her own statement. "Minato-kun, I would like you to meet my apprentice, Shizune." Tsunade gestured as she let him down. "And the pig is Tonton."

A pig with a pearl necklace. He could spend hours piecing all the details he knew about Tsunade-hime and still come up lacking. Who kept a pet pig with jewelry anyway? Apparently, the strongest woman in the world and her obsessive assistant.

"Nice to meet you Shizune-san."

"You too, Minato-kun." The woman's ebony eyes twinkled as she grinned broadly. "I look forward to getting to know you better in the coming days."

"Me too." He kept it short and sweet.

"So, what's this about the Nara gathering?" Tsunade asked.

"My friend Shikamaru's mother ran into us at the market a few days ago." He relayed the information with the cheer expected of a young child. "And invited all of us to come to dinner with all the other clan leaders and their families."

"All of them?" Shizune sounded doubtful, not that Minato could blame her since an informal gathering really was odd.

"Perhaps it's unusual, but not necessarily unheard of." Tsunade remarked, but she looked more thoughtful than before.

This was the opportunity that Kurama had suggested and Minato was

pleased with how organic the opportunity was. Extending his sensory web one last time, he felt no one close enough to be eaves dropping so he replied as per Kurama's plan. "I've really enjoyed having friends. It used to just be me and the fox in my head."

"You can hear it?" Minato didn't need to be looking at Tsunade to hear the worry lacing her voice. And Tsunade had stopped dead at his comment. "You haven't said anything to anyone?"

"I don't listen to him!" Minato protested, making certain his nervous eyes lingered on each woman in turn. "I just want to be normal!"

"I think you're pretty normal to me." Shizune stepped closer and Minato saw a protective gleam enter the young woman's eye. "But I understand why you would be worried. Right Tsunade-sama?"

The blonde woman rubbed her temples before dropping down to look Minato right in the eye. Minato blinked slowly but flinched slightly at the hand raised next to his face.

"Oba-san?"

"I understand that things used to be different for you, Minato. And I hope someday you'll tell me more about what you experienced, but only when you're ready." Tsunade's voice was even and remarkably patient as she placed both hands on his shoulders. "My grandmother, Mito, was a jinchuuriki for the Kyuubi. Just as you now are."

"And Naruto." Minato would never let that be forgotten; father or not, Minato would not let Naruto's sacrifice be dismissed.

"And Naruto." Tsunade seemed pensive, but there was a hardening in her eyes that suggested distress and a quavering note of fear in her words. "But, Minato, you must promise me here and now to never keep secrets like this from me again. And I'm not talking about any small troubles that Uzumaki gaki is going to get you into. In those cases, it's better that you *don't* tell me. But anything important like this, you have to tell me. Okay?"

Kurama, you wily old fox. I don't know that I would have considered playing Tsunade like this…you're sneakier than I ever gave you credit for being.

"He tells me things sometimes." Minato keeps his voice hushed and scuffs his foot against the ground. "The fox."

“What sorts of things?” Tsunade’s voice is razor sharp. For all her blustering and the wasted years, Tsunade was still an S-rank kunoichi capable of annihilating platoons of enemies by herself.

“Threats.” Not directed at him, but they were real nonetheless. “He doesn’t like the Senju very much…especially your grandfather.”

“I don’t suppose he would.” Tsunade’s smile could have given Kurama’s demonic nature a run for his money. “But I want you to tell me or Kakashi if you hear from that fox. I promise you won’t be in trouble, but you need to tell me whenever you hear the bijuu.”

“I promise.” Minato crossed his fingers and gave a strained smile. “I still feel like I’m going to be in trouble.”

“If someone tries to make trouble for you, I’ll make trouble for them.” Tsunade’s cracks her knuckles. “But I don’t want you to worry about the bijuu anymore because if that fox starts bothering you, I’ll remind him of exactly why the Senju were so feared.”

“You’re scary sometimes, oba-san.” Minato complained weakly, wiping invisible sweat from his brow. Senju last name or not, that was pure Uzumaki temper in the blonde woman.

“And don’t you forget it.” There was a soft smile, Tsunade leaned closer, and there was the lightest touch of breath teasing his forehead. The kiss was gentle and lasted for the briefest of moments; when the blonde pulled back, Minato thought she looked more content than he had seen her in this lifetime or the last.

“I won’t.” He replied dazedly.

“Tsunade-sama!” Shizune’s alarm raised the hair on the back of Minato’s neck.

“Shizune.” The abrupt cut off was powerful and deliberate. “We’re going shopping.”

“For what?” Minato rushed forward to catch up with the woman who should not be able to walk so quickly in heels like that. Kunoichi really were amazing.

“Just you wait and see!”

Minato raced after her, noticing something smacking his

clothing, and glanced down. It was only thanks to Shizune that Minato didn't end up eating dirt. He somehow muttered a garbled amount of thanks but his attention was diverted almost entirely to a glistening jade pendant swinging from a thin chain around his neck.

This is…but why would she give me this? Jiraiya-sensei always talked about how much this meant to her and…well, the other bit…

Rushing up to his blonde relative, he slipped his hand into her open one and squeezed.

"Thank you, oba-san." Minato whispered, but he was fishing for an answer he wasn't sure would come. "Why did you give me your necklace?"

It was quiet again for a moment and the hand grasping his tightened.

"That necklace belonged to my grandfather who had a dream." The words themselves felt hypnotic. "I always wanted to give it to a person that I felt shared the dream of my grandfather."

"But why did you give it to me?" Minato swallowed dry.

Tsunade looked past him into the distance searching for something beyond his ability to see before those golden eyes warmed as they focused on him. "I gave it to you for a reason I hope you never understand."

Cryptic answers were always the trickiest to decipher, though in the case the answer was more than apparent to someone with insight into the woman's tragic backstory.

"I'll to my best to deserve it, oba-san." Because he understood. Minato really, really understood.

"I know you will." He heard the pain in her voice and felt his finger bones creak in warning.

I can't promise to always stay safe, Tsunade-sama. I cannot promise that I'll return to you like Dan and Nawaki didn't. I can't promise that I'll live. I have too much to do and my odds or survival are questionable. A Hokage's oath is supposed to end with death, but mine continues. I'll do my best not to break your heart, but false promises are dangerous.

“So, what are we shopping for?” Minato resurrected his excitement and felt some of the tension drain from the woman walking beside him.

“Just you wait and see, brat!”

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“I really don’t need new clothes.” Tsunade ignored the muffled protests from the boy behind the curtain. “Mikoto-sama already took me shopping recently.”

“Shut up and finish trying that coat on.” The Sannin hollered as she gleefully added another overpriced kimono to her own pile.

“Tsunade-sama!” The opposite curtain whipped back to display an irate Shizune in a tasteful emerald kimono trimmed with sakura blossoms. “You can’t talk to a child like that! He’s far too young!”

“Bah.” Not for a second would she believe that Minato was not smart enough to know when to take her seriously. The kid definitely didn’t inherit Tobirama’s stern attitude, but his maturity made *her* feel old. “You worry too much Shizune. You’re getting that one too.”

“Tsunade-sama…” The girl flopped forward with a grand sigh before jerking upright and making a face like a fish when she read the price tag. “We can’t afford this— “

“Of course, not.” Tsunade rubbed her hands together eagerly. “But Jiraiya promised to help get us settled into our new lives. That includes new clothes and anything else we might need!”

“I don’t need new clothes!” Her adorable little Minato-chan looked adorable with his rumpled ponytail in the cute red kimono style top and black leggings she had put him in. Shopping was a lot more fun when you could force another person into a million different things.

“You look just like I did when I was young.” Tsunade cooed and motioned to a clerk that was smiling predatorily from the
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sidelines. “We’re going to need the Senju crest added to everything I picked out in that pile.”

Minato and Shizune both shot a horrified look to the staggering pile of garments that was sitting near the counter. Tsunade gave Jiraiya’s coin purse a fond pat.

“Not a problem, Tsunade-sama. There is a small token fee for alterations, but the customer always get what they want in my store.” The leering saleswoman steered a resisting Minato toward a stool in the corner; the little sunshine shot her a pleading look that Tsunade deliberately turned away from to assess a fretting Shizune.

Really, her assistant needed a vacation from life. Perhaps she could cajole Jiraiya into paying for Shizune to take a little trip to a hot spring for a week or two. Better yet, perhaps Tsunade could locate an acceptable suitor, traumatize the man, and finally allow him to sweep her apprentice right out of her sandals.

“We’ve been on the road for years and you haven’t bought yourself anything in all that time aside from the occasional haircut.” Those dark eyes averted and fell to the ground miserably and Tsunade reached out and placed a hand on the Shizune’s shoulder. “Enjoy this moment while it lasts because we both know that managing money is not my strong suit.”

“Some help is one thing, but that many garments seems more than excessive.” The girl gestured lamely at the oversized stack that an elderly employee was slowly folding into neat stacks. “Surely we’re taking advantage of the situation just a little.”

“Shizune, it’s Jiraiya.” Tsunade rolled her eyes. The toad sage could pretend all he liked, but the man was loaded. Apparently, there were more closet perverts in the world than she knew. Add to that his S-rank pay the old perv got from his spy ring and Jiraiya was rolling in more money than he could spend in half a dozen lifetimes.

“I’m not comfortable spending this kind of money.” Shizune moaned.

“Not to worry, because I have no such reservations.” Tsunade snapped up another load of kimonos and carried them past a horrified Shizune into a change room.

“Tsunade-sama!” There came the reprimanding outcry.

“Shizune.” All business and that snapped the girl’s jaw shut. “What you have failed to realize is that you and I have to be the example now.”

“What?” Shizune blinked.

“Minato has been among the Uchiha all this time.” Tsunade nearly slapped herself when she saw Shizune looking more confused than a drunk Uzumaki. “We need to be the example for him now! No Senju kid is going to be any less than an Uchiha!”

“Eek!” Shizune jerked back against the mirror. “But I thought you said politics was for empty-headed fools with nothing better to do than meddle in the affairs of others.”

“It’s true, but Fugaku is an ass and I’m not about to let him rub my face in the dirt anymore.” Tsunade shoved a teetering Shizune into the change room. “We’re going to instill a little clan pride into our brat if it’s the last thing we do. Now try those on! You don’t want people to think poorly of Minato for having shabbily dressed family members, do you? And don’t forget, you’ll need formal wear, casual wear, and everyday wear for the hospital too!”

Shizune shouted something that Tsunade totally disregarded as she spied a rack of expensively impressive footwear. Seizing three different pairs of sandals reinforced with iron plates for kunoichi wear, Tsunade kicked off her old sandals. “Now *this* is what I’ve been waiting for. Come to mama.”

Half an hour later, Tsunade lead two traumatized individuals out of the store and tossed Jiraiya’s empty ryo pouch into the conveniently located trash bin outside the shop. The proprietor had been more than happy to offer free delivery of their purchases in a few days, but Tsunade had all too happily volunteered to have someone—namely Jiraiya—drop by to pick everything up in a few days. Besides, Jiraiya had promised to arrange for accommodations outside of sensei’s home by the end of the day.

“I think you overdid it Tsunade-sama.” Shizune choked out as she nervously plucked at a yellow yukata she had worn out of the boutique after Tsunade took a kunai to her old clothing.

“Nonsense.” Tsunade wiggled her toes in the blue leather heels she was sporting. “But shopping is more exhausting than I recall. I could use a drink!”

“Ahem!” Shizune tapped her foot.

“I meant over lunch, Shizune.” Tsunade rolled her eyes, reached back and tugged Minato up next to her and laced their fingers together.

“Lunch sounds great.” Minato agreed easily and Tsunade shot Shizune a smug look.

“What are we waiting for then.” Tsunade lead the charge, pleased with how easily she dispersed the crowd with her presence.

They had nearly reached an attractive looking tea house when she was suddenly pulled to a stop and Minato shook off her hand and walked straight toward a dirty looking alleyway.

“Minato-kun!” Shizune called urgently.

Tsunade was already hot on the boy’s heels when he stopped, put both hands on his hips, and addressed a mutt with a hitai-ate.

“Hello Pakkun-san.” The scarlet eyed boy smiled faintly. “Did Kakashi send you to follow me?”

That brat! When I get my hands on that scarecrow, he’s dead!

“Yep.” The dog shot Tsunade a leery look. “Not to edge onto your turf, Tsunade-sama, but my summoner has been a little more overprotective lately.”

“Is that what that brat is calling this?” The blonde waved an unimpressed hand imperiously toward the nervous canine. Served the mutt right stalking her around town.

“I think it’s sweet!” Shizune remarked as the pig in her arms made a cross between a squeak and a sigh of agreement.

“Since when is stalking sweet?” Tsunade grumbled. “And people say Maito Gai is the weird one…”

“We’re going to have lunch. Do you want to come with us?” Oh Minato. Far too sweet. What was Tsunade going to do with him?

“I really shouldn’t…” The dog trailed off but Tsunade swore the eyes on that ugly mutt bulged in a semblance of cuteness that no Hatake scion would be capable of resisting.

“I’ll get you anmitsu!” Minato shrugged with an easy smile before motioning toward the tea store.

“Nothing like keeping the company of the person you’re following.” Pakkun scrambled out of the alley and scurried over to the teahouse door. “You all coming or what?”

“Unbelievable.” Tsunade watched the dog head to the table and pop up on Minato’s side for some enthusiastic scratching behind the ears.

“Ah, Minato-kun.” Shizune asked as they sat down. Shinobi were the bread and butter of establishments like these so the owner did not so much as bat an eyelash at the canine sitting at the table. “Do you need help reading the menu?”

Why hadn’t she thought of thought of that?

“No, thank you, Shizune-san.” The boy lifted his menu from a stack and was already scooting closer to the canine. “I can read already.”

Tsunade was impressed. Reading was not an abnormal skill for the boy’s level, but it provided a partial explanation for the boy’s extensive vocabulary. Most Clan children would be reading already even if civilian children might struggle, but Tsunade’s instincts kept insisting that Minato’s advancement was almost too amazing. But that notion fell apart when one looked at Kakashi or Senju Tobirama. Both men had frightening mental prowess; this just meant that Tsunade was going to have to re-evaluate her conditions for normal.

“You summon too don’t you, oba-san?” Minato asked from where he was skimming his menu.

“I do.” Although she had not had cause to summon Katsuya in an age. Though unlike other summons, Tsunade supposed the slug would not be too miffed by an impromptu summoning for a chat between long-time comrades. “I could introduce you sometime if you like.”

“That would be fun.”

The table fell quiet while everyone studied the menus. The server returned after a few moments to take an order of sake—just one, for her nerves—a pair of soups, some dumplings for the kiddo, and an anmitsu for the dog who devoured half of his dish in less than

three seconds.

“So, what type of ninja do you want to be, pup?” Hatake’s stalker summon asked.

Tsunade swallowed her first but, looked up, and watched an almost sad sort of smile tease the boy’s lips; it was a strange sensation to feel like the world had stopped moving, but Tsunade was frozen awaiting the boy’s response

“I don’t know yet, but I know that I want to become strong enough to protect people I care about.” In that moment, Tsunade knew she was done for. She had been sincere when she gave the boy her necklace, but hearing those words finalized everything.

Tsunade loved Minato. And there was no coming back from this.

“I think your dream is just right.” Shizune’s voice called out from next to her.

“It definitely reminds me of someone.” Tsunade finally said and she quietly swiped a tear away from her eye and averted her gaze.

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“So?” The one-word query was crammed with anticipation and overblown with manic energy.

Kakashi gave an exaggerated, thoughtful nod before jutting a thumb toward the state of the art kitchen that would surely *not* be used by him. Take out and ration bars were the only things Sakumo taught him before the man’s suicide. Kakashi eyed the contraption that was some fancy device for preparing tea and pretended not to see the fully stocked cabinets of pots, pans, and who in the hell knows what half of that stuff even did.

“Appliances already?”

“Someone picked out stuff and arranged the delivery.” The unusually vague response set Kakashi on heightened alert.

“The electrical and plumbing are a go? I didn’t know you
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specialized in those areas?"

Tenzo's ears flushed scarlet and the man mopped his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand.

"Ah, I may have arranged for some additional help." The man's eyes rounded eerily and Kakashi detected a faint tremor in the man's tapping foot. "But it's all perfect! Windows *with* chakra-reinforced glass for seals. Appliances. I *personally* constructed the majority of furniture. I even recruited some of the squad to reinforce and create a personal training ground out back next to the trees I put up!"

"I see." Kakashi prodded a vibrant forest green cushion in the kitchen and dubiously prodded a stack of floral kitchen towels with daffodils and excessive greenery. "And this?"

"I had help with some of the décor." Tenzo remarked skittishly, not quite able to look Kakashi in the eye.

Kakashi's eyes wandered to the living area also curiously sporting a green sofa with vibrant yellow and orange throw cushions. It was absolutely hideous: Naruto would love it when he came to visit. And Kakashi absolutely *knew* that Gai was to blame.

Unless…Kakashi speculatively eyed the nervously shifting Tenzo and eye-smiled brightly. There were certainly ways to make sure the other man realized how annoyed he was…later.

"How many bedrooms does this place have now?"

Tenzo looked so utterly relieved that Kakashi almost felt bad for the torture he was going to be inflicting on the man. Although, another look to his Gai-approved living room quashed that guilt like a bug.

"Five bedrooms at present." Tenzo rattled off details like mission reports. "There are three upstairs and two on the main floor. The master was created with you in mind, while the room directly next to it was designed with Minato in mind. The other upstairs room is a guest room furnished with the basics. The hallway off the den has two bedrooms that I've furnished with basics. Aside from that, you have two offices, which I suppose could double as bedrooms, in addition to a walk-in pantry and a few other rooms."

"How big is this place? Why so many rooms?" Kakashi

frowned. Did two people *really* need that much space? And he was not all that interested in marrying anyone so that freed up a lot of room.

"Someone mentioned to me that your brother has a few good friends." For all his genius, Kakashi could not quite wrap his mind around what the other man was suggesting… "You know…don't normal kids have sleepovers? The extra rooms might come in handy for that."

Sleepovers? Not for the first time, Kakashi wondered if this was really a good idea after all. Children were frightening but Minato's little gang spelled nothing but trouble. Although ever since Tsunade rolled into town, Kakashi had slid into the good graces of the hellion pack. Even sensei's son thought he was hip and cool. Maybe sleepovers were not the worst thing in the world; surely an ANBU captain could handle a bunch of small children, right?

"Okay then!" Kakashi clapped his hands together and reached for the banister and decidedly chose *not* to comment on the carvings of howling dogs etched in the wood. "Shall we inspect the upstairs?"

Tenzo did not reply, but on the way up Kakashi was absolutely positive he heard more than a couple unflattering mutterings from the man. Something about abuse of authority and picky bastards: nothing for Kakashi to concern himself with.

Silently praying that Gai had not been in charge of bedroom décor, Kakashi poked his head into the first room of muted colors and discarded that room. Moving to the next, the copy-nin nodded to himself as he looked in.

All of the furnishings were away from the walls that had gallons of sealed paint with brushes waiting to be used.

"Two genin teams are coming in this afternoon for D-ranks." Tenzo offered from the doorway, looking far too smug. Someone needed to be knocked down a peg or two. "One team is painting the exterior of the compound and the other is painting the interior."

Kakashi sidled up to the bedframe that had a massive headboard fashioned to resemble a massive tree with a pattern of thousands of leaves etched into the grain of the wood. Tenzo was showing his Shodai-worship in this piece for sure. The room itself was incredibly well designed though so Kakashi could hardly complain.

Wall mouldings in the corners that looked like Hashirama's fabled wood dragons and the howling face of a massive dog that was a perfect representation of his summon, Bull.

"You know Tenzo, you have real talent." Kakashi watched the other man color red from the praise. "Are you sure you don't want to retire and become a wood carver? You show a great deal of aptitude for this."

"You ordered me to do this!" The suddenly irate man howled. "I was just completing my mission parameters!"

"Maa, no need to be so feisty." Kakashi waggled his fingers in the other man's face. "I just paid you a compliment."

Kakashi was prepared to continue the banter with his cute little subordinate when a colorful patchwork quilt caught his eye from where it was folded neatly underneath a pile of bedding that featured cute little puppies. Sliding it out from underneath the packaged sheets, he ran a finger over the patterned material that still looked to be in perfect condition after so many years.

"Gai brought that to me with a few other things that he told me should go in your house." Tenzo sounded unnecessarily strained, but Kakashi hummed in acceptance. It was a very much like Gai to hoard away a box of things that Kakashi might want in the future.

Burying his nose in a patchwork square, Kakashi was thankful for his unnaturally keen sense of smell. And there it was, a linger musty patch of spices and natural body odour. So faint but a Hatake's nose was never wrong. That was Kakashi's mother preserved in the blanket's fabric. How appropriate that it should soothe the youngest member of his family into sleep.

"My mother made this not long before she died." Kakashi felt the need to tell someone, not out of any true sorrow, but just to evoke the memory of a person that time itself seemed to have forgotten. Not even Kakashi would have been able to remember her had it not been for pictures. "I think she would be pleased to have it on the pup's bed. My father told me once that she had wanted a large family."

There was an awkward silence than and Kakashi carefully replaced the quilt fondly.

"Ah, would you like to see your room?" Tenzo shifted like

an animal ready to bolt so Kakashi took pity on the other man and wandered toward the last bedroom.

Unlike the other rooms that were taped and were being readied for a paint job, Kakashi's entire room was already done. The paint on the wall was a calming shade of indigo and the bedding was in mixed shades of grey. The bed was king-sized and would probably give him nightmares for months, but Kakashi would deal. The past few weeks with Minato had been a balm on his soul already so uneasy sleeping was a small price to pay.

The woodwork in this room was exquisite but understated. A large closet in the corner, with an attached bathroom next to it. A desk and chair with decorations that could only have come from Gai. There was a smiling picture of his parents from happier days, his genin team photograph, and…the latest caught even Kakashi by surprise. There was a picture of Kakashi carrying his younger brother on his shoulders. It was a candid shot that had the small boy smiling and even Kakashi hardly believed how relaxed his body looked in the picture. How happy.

So maybe Gai was his best friend. And just maybe Kakashi would say yes the next time Gai challenged him. Not that he felt it was necessary to say thank you even if Kakashi definitely was thankful.

Kakashi eyed the fresh arrangement of daffodils sitting next to the pictures and shook his head. Yeah, those had to go. Scooping up the flowers, vase and all, he turned to Tenzo.

"Thank you, Tenzo. I couldn't have done this without you."

The abashed man smiled faintly. "Your welcome, sempai."

For a second the stared at one another. Kakashi at Tenzo. Tenzo at Kakashi. Finally the other man cracked.

"May I be dismissed?" The man's patience finally cracked.

"You don't like hanging out with me? I'm hurt." Kakashi rolled his shoulders forward and crinkled his eye in a mockery of despondency.

"Sempai it's not that! I simply haven't been…" The man trailed off and his eyes narrowed on Kakashi's shaking shoulders before the man exploded. "You're making fun of me! I'm leaving!"

Tenzo vanished in a poof of smoke just as Kakashi broke out into a hearty round of sniggering. That guy was far too easy to mess with.

Humming a tune, Kakashi flipped open his book and started reading as he walked down the newly varnished stairs of his new house. Without looking, he emptied the flowers into the fancy trash can and deposited the vase into the sink, and exited onto the impressive wrap-around porch with elaborate looking lounge chairs and dropped into one. Yep, these things were keepers. Way too comfortable.

Just about to check on just how naughty Satsuki-chan was being, Kakashi heard the chair next to him creak.

“I wondered when you would get around to dropping by.” Kakashi drawled, not bothering to take his eye off his book.

“Heh, I’ve had a hectic couple of days.” The toad sage muttered and there was a shuffling sound before the other man’s struggling ceased followed by a pleased sigh. “These are pretty nice chairs. They pair well with the new house. It’s a lot bigger than the original building.”

“Minions are useful.” Kakashi cheered before sharpening his tongue. “I’ll miss them.”

“So you do plan to retire from black ops missions.” Jiraiya mused and the faint scratch of a pen skimming over paper tickled his ears. “Sensei suspected you might do something drastic like this. The old man sure has you pegged.”

“Hokage-sama is an insightful man.” Kakashi replied as blandly as possible.

“Look, Kakashi, I think it would be pretty foolish to mince words. We both have other pursuits we’d much rather be spending our time on.” Kakashi caressed the edges of a dog-eared page before snapping his book closed and sliding it away. “You know why I’m here.”

“Could be a number of reasons.” Kakashi sprang onto the deck railing and did a quick check of the area.

“Cut the crap.” Jiraiya rose to stand next to him. “I already put a privacy seal into effect so that no one disturbs us and—“

“And so that Danzo doesn’t listen in, right?” Kakashi watched the guard raise in the other man and mentally congratulated himself for hitting the nail on the head.

“You really deserve the label of genius.” A statement with no flattery and a guarded look. “But *if* that was the case, it would not be the reason I’m visiting you now.”

“Minato is going to stay with me.” Kakashi fought back the instinct to snarl, but the ferocity of the statement was still tempered by an extreme drop in tone. “I can’t stop her from interacting with him and I wouldn’t want to do that anyway. My brother has made it clear that he wants to have a relationship with Tsunade. But I’m going to bring him here after everything is finished.”

“That isn’t your decision to make.” Jiraiya remarked stone-faced.

“Minato might have Senju blood, but he’s my brother.” Kakashi lashed out with words, feeling a nervous loss of ability that not even Obito’s gift could fix. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Technically, a jinchuuriki is property of the village.” Kakashi’s blood ran cold and all he could see was the bloodied bodies of the two individuals he had adored like parents. “And military assets fall under the jurisdiction of the Hokage.”

“Then what is Naruto?” Kakashi growled, relishing the way the Sannin flinched slightly. “I think Uzumaki Naruto is more than just one of the Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki. And I don’t care how my brother came into existence and I don’t care if he is a container for a bijuu. He’s my brother.”

“Good to hear it, kid.” Jiraiya clapped Kakashi on the arm merrily. “You got a good head on those bony shoulders.”

Wait a minute, what was going on?

“You and I both fucked up big time in regards to Naruto.” Kakashi felt the stone return to his stomach and he felt all the anger drain out of his body. “I’m not looking forward to dying and having to face *my* Minato. Hell, when I think of what Kushina would do to me if she ever figured out that I didn’t come back and raise her son.”

Even Kakashi shuddered sympathetically at that particular misery. Although sooner or later that peril would be his to face too…

"I'll run interference with the old man to make sure you get custody of the kid." Kakashi picked up on the trap even if he could not determine exactly what the penalty was. "But I want something in return."

Now that left the playing field open to far too many possibilities and Kakashi's mind struggled to come up with an appropriate answer. Squeezing the rail of his hand, he turned his head once toward the fancy new gates Tenzo had made and back toward the house, nose wrinkling before his lone eye rounded in shock and he whipped around to stare at the smug man rubbing his hands together cheerfully.

"No."

"Yep." Jiraiya smirked. "I'll even throw in my services free of charge to set up a sealing system all over your property. I'll even add in some specialty ones to save you a bundle of cash."

"Not a chance." Kakashi snarled viciously, turning to smash an innocent rosebud that had dared to be in snatching distance.

"I'll throw in a signed copy of the Icha Icha book that isn't supposed to be released until next month."

Damn. Kakashi jerked upright and felt dismay when the tantalizing offer actually weakened his resolve. His reading material *had* been rather dry lately. But boredom was rather temporary and Jiraiya's proposition could have lasting, psychological ramifications. Or deadly ones.

"I see that I have your attention." The smug bastard leered at him. "Good to know I really do have a captive audience."

"What you're asking is no small matter." Kakashi reminded the other man, slumping slightly as he felt an impending loss coming his way even if the copy-nin could not foresee why. "Tsunade-sama and I are very different people and I just can't see us living together."

"Temporarily." Jiraiya swatted away his protest with a pleased gleam. "I just want her to have a few months of stability while she recovers. After that, I'm going to buy Tsunade her own place. And unless you're retiring, this should make things easier if you're away on missions. Someone will be home with the kid."

"I was going to leave him with the Uchiha." Kakashi

bristled.

"Tsunade needs a place to stay anyway." Jiraiya countered. "Can't stay with sensei forever."

"Couldn't she just have the Senju Compound rebuilt?" Kakashi wondered.

"Tsunade needs a home. She doesn't need a reminder of all the people that aren't coming back. Staying with you for a while will do her some good until I find a place for her and Shizune."

"Are you staying with us too?" Kakashi grimaced at the amount of resentment in his voice. "And Shizune?"

"Might as well!" Jiraiya clapped Kakashi on the back companionably, causing the copy-nin to sink into a puddle of dread. "Besides, the little squirt is giving me an in with Naruto. Can't pass that up."

"This is not going to be permanent." Kakashi rekindled his resolve. "You *will* find her a place. Two months is the absolute limit and than she's gone."

"You're really holding a grudge against her aren't you, kid." Jiraiya sounded suddenly glum.

"She hurt someone I care about." Kakashi dropped his head. "I don't trust her and I don't know if I ever will be able to forget how hurt he was."

Jiraiya remained quiet at his side before the man sighed, crossed his arms, and stared out onto the horizon wistfully.

"If you give her a chance, that's all I ask."

"A chance is the only thing I can afford to give her." Kakashi returned.

"Tonight?"

"You can get them settled tonight." Kakashi paused. "Unless you want to join me at Nara Yoshino's dinner party. I hear you two have a history."

Kakashi had the luxury of seeing the toad sage wince and reflexively cover his nether regions. Yep, it looks like Shikaku had not

exaggerated on that little story.

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Naruto had been looking forward to this night every time someone reminded him about it. Kaa-san mentioned it with that super scary smile every time Naruto was getting ready for one of his pranks. How the woman knew he was up to something was always a mystery because not even Minato—who seemed to notice *everything*—saw Naruto every time!

The only thing that soured Naruto's mood was remembering that tomorrow Minato was leaving with Kakashi. Naruto understood the other boy was not going to be gone permanently, but that did not mean he liked it.

Whatever. He would forget about it until tomorrow.

"Just how are you all up there?!" The irate Inuzuka howled up at them, even swiping a clawed hand futilely in their direction.

Naruto sniggered and stuck his tongue out at the boy. "Hehe!"

The blonde smirked cheekily as the dog boy literally hopped up and down with outrage and continued attack the wall with his canine nails.

"Kiba-san's extroverted nature is offensive to my hearing." The sunglasses kid was speaking in that boring deadpan that Naruto tuned out because he never fully understood with the bug-boy was saying.

"The Inuzuka Clan is known for their colorful natures." Neji at least sort of made sense even if he was still kind of a stuck-up jerk. "But otou-san told me that Tsume is on good terms with Hiashi-sama…"

"My father affirms the truth of that matter." Shino added blandly.

"Would you stop being so noisy!" Ino screamed and chucked one of Chouji's empty hot-dog wrappers at Kiba.
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Dang…Ino was scary when she was mad. Naruto swore he would avoid bringing that wrath down on himself. Kaa-san was bad enough when she was upset.

"How did you even get up there?!" Kiba moaned, managing to claw himself halfway up the side of the Nara building before sliding back down.

"Tch, Isn't it obvious?" Naruto snorted while Shikamaru continued to recline without opening his eyes.

"Ya ain't got no ladder so it sure as heck isn't obvious to me!"

"Baka." Shikamaru grumbled. "It's too troublesome to explain."

"I'm gonna pound you when I get up there, Nara!"

"Good luck with that."

"Shouldn't someone go help him up here?" The boy that shared Naruto's enthusiasm with food chimed in over his crunch of chips.

"Why would we want another loudmouth up here?" Sasuke grumbled from where he was sitting back to back with Minato. "Naruto is enough."

"Hey!" An indignant shout, that Naruto totally sympathized with, called from below.

"Why are you always being such a jerk?!" Naruto hissed viciously. Sasuke was always acting like he was so much cooler and better at everything. Brother or not, he needed a beating!

Except Sasuke yelped sharply and seemed to wilt when Minato-chan turned and glared at him in a way that reminded Naruto of his new kaa-san except it was way, *way* more guilt-trippy. Whenever he got that look, Naruto felt like he had taken a kunai to a puppy or something.

"Sasuke, you can do better." Minato remarked quietly before giving Ino's long kimono a tug and distracting the blonde with a well-timed compliment and leaving Sasuke in a sulk.

A small gasp and a tugging on his sleeves prevented the blonde from lunging at his sort-of brother. Turning sharply, he spied Hinata looking a bit nervous but insistent just the same.

"Ano, Naruto-kun." The blonde's stomach plummeted when he realized he had made his friend uncomfortable. "Maybe we could help Kiba-kun learn to climb walls too."

"Eh?" Why in the world would they want to do that? "Why, Hinata-chan?"

Naruto watched his friend fiddle with the sleeve of her kimono before nodding to herself and straightening. "Because seeing someone hurting isn't fun. I wouldn't want you to be left out, Naruto-kun."

Naruto felt like a real jerk. Hinata was absolutely right. How many times had he watched other kids playing and had not been allowed to join in?

Naruto swung himself over the ledge and felt his heart beat a little faster when he saw the other boy was already trudging away with a droop in his entire posture.

"Kiba, wait up!" Naruto jumped down and raced toward the boy who was slowly turning back around.

"Eh?" The dog boy cocked his head to the side in confusion.

"Come on! I'll show you how to walk on walls!" Naruto slung an arm around the taller boy and dragged him back to the building. "I'll bet you're creative like me too! Once you get this down, we'll plan a prank for all the grown ups! Hehe!"

Naruto felt his stomach clenched, but when the other boy replied it was with that same roguish smirk and satisfaction that Naruto saw in himself.

"You bet! Now show me the tricks you're doing!"

"Alright, I'll share some of my ideas while we work." Naruto scratched his head then. "Err..."

"What?" The other boy asked.

Naruto *really* did not want to admit that he wasn't sure how

to go about teaching someone else. Hinata trotted up and the blonde latched onto her desperately.

"I'm gonna demonstrate while Hinata-chan explains!"

"Her?" Kiba looked dubious; that certainly wouldn't do. Hinata could do anything!

"M-me?" The girl shivered slightly and Naruto rounded on her clucking.

"You're awesome, Hinata-chan! You helped me out a few days ago. So, this is gonna be a breeze." Before the girl could doubt herself, Naruto ran to the side of the house and hopped onto the side. It initially felt weird, but it was almost fun to cling to vertical surfaces. It was like having suction cups on your feet that you had to turn on and off. The sticking part was easier than turning it on and off, but it was easier to do when you didn't think about it too much. "Ta da! Look at me!"

"Hey, I've seen shinobi in my Clan do that!" Kiba exclaimed, suddenly looking incredibly excited. "I bet Ma would be super impressed if I learn how to do this!"

Just before Kiba threw himself at the wall, Hinata slid a hand in front of the dog boy and shook her head.

"Do you know how to use chakra yet, Kiba?"

Oh right! Hinata sure was brilliant! He had forgotten all about that.

"Err…I don't know?" Kiba blinked.

Naruto hopped down again. "Well see, the first thing you have to do is…"

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Mikoto emptied her sake cup and glumly resumed slicing up some daikon. Her depression had not gone unnoticed by Yoshino; within moments of arriving at the home, Mikoto found herself yanked from Fugaku's arm and unceremoniously shoved into the kitchen with a spare apron flung at her head.
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Inoichi's wife Mara had greeted her with a wink over a wine glass, Chouza's wife—for the life of her, Mikoto could *not* remember the woman's name—was putting some finishing touches on trays of anpan. That made the Uchiha woman wonder why they needed so much food when it was just a meeting of Clan Heads and their families. Mitsuri had to be an Aburame with those heavily ridged sunglasses; said woman was seasoning pork skewers in a methodical, almost mathematical, manner.

Tsume's greeting had been very gentle all things considered. A feral leer and a smack to her backside that had the room gaping, Mikoto's cheeks burning, and Yamanaka Mara laughing and smacking the counter.

"I just can't believe the mighty Uchiha have joined us for a quaint little get-together." Tsume smirked from where she was slicing a large chunk of beef into perfectly even slices.

"Even shinobi of our prowess enjoy company." Mikoto refused to yield the field to Tsume. The woman was known to verbally eviscerate anyone that hesitated and she had her pride. "I'm merely surprised to see you cooking, Tsume. I thought you would leave that to us girls!"

There was a collective murmur and Tsume went still for an instant before breaking out into a large smile and vaulting the counter. Mikoto tensed for an altercation, but a second later, Mikoto shrieked as her feet dangled midair and she was twirled around like a small child.

"Putmedown!" Mikoto felt a peculiar surge of panic and she flailed slightly, her knife barely missing Mitsuri's coat sleeve as she was jostled up and down.

"The kitten has claws!" Mikoto's stomach rolled as she was spun again while the Inuzuka woman chuckled. "What a treat!"

Mikoto regained her balance only because she was a kunoichi—albeit an out of practice one. The heavy-handed arm that smelled strongly of doghair draped itself over her shoulders.

"We hardly need those men to have a good time." The Yamanaka woman laughed. "We can make trouble and have fun all on our own."

"Such antics are to be expected in the presence of my

husband's comrade." Was she crazy, or was the Aburame woman teasing?

The hand around her shoulders slithered away and a wide-eyed Mikoto watched Tsume sidle over to the Aburame and elbowed her gently in the side.

"You know you love me."

"There is a degree of fondness I feel for you." No mistaking it this time, there was definite humor and Mitsuri's mouth flicked upward in a brief semblance of a smile. "Though Shibi's tolerance for your behavior exceeds my own."

"I knew you loved me." The brash woman chuckled as she raced back to her meat and Mikoto wondered if this would be what a girl's night would be like.

"Shou, are those things done?" Yoshino barked and Mikoto filed away the Akimichi woman's name for later use.

"You can't rush perfection." The meaty fingers demonstrated a surprising amount of finesse as they daintily sprinkled the top of each bun with extra seasoning.

"I know better than to dispute that." Yoshino rinsed her floured hands. "Uchiha, are you coming to our get together this week?"

Several sets of eyes zeroed in on her and she swallowed reflexively.

"To be honest, I haven't had a lot of time to think about it since Tsunade returned to Konoha." Mikoto forced herself not to frown and deliberately set her knife down and began adding the daikon to the salad she was working on.

"Is that why you've been sulking tonight?" Mara nicked a bun when Shou turned her back.

"I am not sulking." Mikoto protested.

"You are." The chorused answers shocked her and she cast a look around helplessly from support from somewhere.

"Can't say that I blame you." Tsume licked the meat's juices

off her fingers, either unaware or uncaring of the glares she was attracting from all corners. “I hear the Senju brat has been with you for almost a month. Practically makes him family. I wouldn’t be all that happy to give the kid up either.”

What could she possibly say to that? She did not have a right to be, but Mikoto felt upset and resentful of how things had turned out. Knowing her feelings were irrational didn’t change the fact that Minato was her boys’ best friend and was a joy to have in the household. The silver haired boy helped without being asked, kept his room cleaned, and distracted Naruto and Sasuke in mostly positive ways.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, Mikoto loved the boy. And a boy she had grown to love was being taken from her and given to Hatake Kakashi and Senju Tsunade to fight over like two dogs fight over a scrap of meat.

Mikoto was disgusted.

“They should have left him with me.” Mikoto heard her voice drop several decibels and was aware the sound of prep work had fallen quiet around her.

“Maybe so.” The Yamanaka woman drawled and Mikoto lifted her head to watch the platinum blonde inspect her fingernails with a critical eye. “Do you plan on banning your children from visiting?”

“No.” Absolutely not.

“Are you going to tell the kid he can’t come to visit?”

“Of course, not!” Mikoto set her hands on her hips.

“It seems to me that you can still care about the boy and maintain a relationship with him. And from what I’ve seen, those kids are going to be together enough that you’ll feel like the boy is still living with you.” Mikoto felt her anger melt away as the Yamanaka’s far-too-knowing eyes watched her before the woman’s expression eased into a smile. “And let me reassure you, efforts have been made to make sure this transition runs as smoothly as possible.”

There was something cryptic there, but it was well-known that no one manipulated the mind the way a Yamanaka could.

There were voices in the hallway and Mikoto's stomach flew up into her throat at the sound of a screaming baby. There was a set of heavy footsteps, the crying drew nearer, and into the room swept a less than regal Hyuuga Hiashi with a squalling babe in his arms. The manic Hyuuga leader's eyes darted about wildly and Mikoto held her breath until the man pinned her in place. Holding up a hand as if warding off attack, it did little good as the bundle of baby girl was thrust into her arms.

"You offered your assistance, Uchiha." Hiashi swiped at the dark bags underneath his pearly eyes. The man really did look terrible. "So here she is."

Mikoto's jaw dropped as the Hyuuga patriarch half-stumbled out of the kitchen and disappeared back toward the open area. Hanabi looked red-faced and utterly wretched so Mikoto replaced the babe on her shoulder and started swaying in an effort to soothe the infant. Almost immediately the crying tapered off and the babe fell quiet.

"Someone has a knack for the little ones." Tsume sounded impressed and perplexed all at once. "Don't take this personally Mikoto, but I can't believe Hiashi left his daughter with you. I've known the man for years and he hasn't exactly made a secret of his lack of enthusiasm for your clan."

"No offense taken." Mikoto eased the baby's head a bit higher onto her shoulder and felt herself sigh in relief when Hanabi settled without making a peep. "I had some words for Hiashi a few days ago. He kicked me out afterward in a very polite fashion. Believe me, I'm just as surprised as you are."

"About time someone yanked that man's chain." Yoshino muttered.

"I give him shit all the time." Tsume protested, even as she leaned in to sniff the baby for a moment. "He's become close to immune after all these years. It's hardly my fault."

"She's a sweet baby." The Akimichi woman was lightly running a pudgy finger over the infant's cheek. "It's just such a shame that she lost her mother before she had the chance to know her."

"Inoichi reached out to Hiashi after his wife passed." Even Mara seemed subdued by the turn in conversation. "It was no use. No one clams up tighter than a Hyuuga."

“Hinata has been a joy to have around.” Mikoto continued to sway from side to side for the baby’s benefit. “If your children enjoy her company, perhaps you might invite her into your homes as well.”

“Ino could certainly use another playmate.” Mara nibbled her bun and stirred her drink absently.

“I think we should do another one of these group events.” Tsume put her hands together. “I would be more than happy to host all of you.”

“Not if you’re the one cooking.” Shou jabbed the Inuzuka with her spatula. “I’ve tasted your goods Tsume and I wouldn’t serve it to a pig.”

“Is that so?” Tsume leered ferally.

“Kaa-san!” Mara’s pretty little daughter raced into the room and latched onto her mother with a vibrant grin and—yep, the kid was up to something.

“What is it, munchkin?” Mara asked with an all-knowing smile while nursing her drink.

“Can I have one of the platters of anpan?” Ino asked with little pretense.

“A whole platter?” Shou jolted. “We only have three. What do you need that many anpan for?”

“Daddy asked me to get a snack for everyone. I think even that snotty Hiashi looked hungry.” Tsume laughed at the last while everyone except Mara and Mikoto seemed to be buying into the little ruse hook, line, and sinker.

“Of course,” Tsume lifted one of the trays and looked at Ino dubiously. “You sure you can carry this thing, kid? You’re pretty tiny.”

“I might be small, but I’m tough too!” Ino flexed her tiny arms and made a face that Mikoto assumed was meant to be impressive.

“That’s the spirit kiddo!” Tsume deposited a hefty tray that the girl noticeably strained to lift. “Go show them whose boss!”

“Thank you!” The blue-eyed girl chirped as she turned,

swaying on slightly, and slowly made her way out of the kitchen.

"I can't wait to hear if they like my work!" Shou clapped her hands together cheerily.

"Ino's such a good girl." Yoshino drawled from where she was adding lemons to a pitcher of water.

"Indeed." Mitsuri murmured in agreement.

Mikoto suppressed her laughter only because of the sleeping baby in her arms. How could these women not realize they had been taken for a ride? The answer was obvious though: they lacked a Naruto in their lives.

"Ino is up to something." Mara shook her head thoughtfully and restored Mikoto's hope for sanity.

"More like my boys are up to something and have dragged your children into a conspiracy." Mikoto murmured, delighting in the sudden sea of expressions ranging from impressed to disbelieving.

"A prank." Yoshino breathed thoughtfully. "I did hear about an incident in the Hokage's tower, but I didn't know the extent of it."

"More like Shikaku couldn't be *bothered* with telling you." Mara huffed indulgently. "And as long as we're not the ones being victimized, I'm content to enjoy the show."

"How are we going to enjoy the show if we're stuck in here?" Shou folded her arms.

"Point." Yoshino clucked. "Ladies, shall we start bringing out dinner so we can take a closer look?"

"I'm in." Mikoto balanced the baby in one hand and lifted a pitcher of lemonade in the other.

One thing was for sure, Mikoto was enjoying herself.

"Me too." Tsume stood balancing a large meat roast. "I wonder if my Hana will get caught in this trap."

"If she's lucky, Itachi will rescue her." Mikoto was out of the room with the rest of the women on her heels carrying salads and other goodies. "My husband won't notice it. Clan arrogance is not congruent with intelligence and Fugaku falls for these things over and

over again."

"Oh dear." Shou gasped. "This explains why the larder seems to be missing so much food of late. I was blaming Chouza!"

"Sorry about that." Mikoto muttered an apology as she frowned at the door and her arms.

"I'll get the door!" Mara called, rushing past to open the latch.

"Don't worry about it." Shou called from two ladies down. "If it means an Akimichi isn't going to fail a stealth course in the Academy, I'm all for it."

"Shino has made a friend." Mitsuri spoke from behind an enormous salad bowl. "I feel that he is becoming more social and I have noticed no significant behavioral lapses. I have no complaints in continued association."

"Thanks." Mikoto waved a greeting to the men lounging outside, spying the blonde girl approaching with her own heavily laden tray. "It looks like we made it just in time. Ino-chan is right over there."

Yoshino was already depositing her dish on the buffet table just outside the house "If only Nara men were more motivated… Shikamaru could never attract a girl like her."

"They're only four, Yoshino." Mikoto thrust the pitcher of juice to Yoshino and winked at Hiashi who was frowning at his sleeping daughter jealously.

"She's right though." Mara grimaced as she eyed the group of men. "We Yamanaka are high strung. It's why Inoichi frequents bars and I shop. We all have diversions."

"That's very honest of you." Mikoto allowed.

"You don't know the half of it." Yoshino muttered. "Now be quiet. I see more movement. I bet the show is about to start!"

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The roof was occupied by a hoard of children, so Kakashi
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settled for not-stalking his little brother from the questionable safety of a copse of trees. The copy-nin was almost positive that Shikaku had looked his way more than once, but the Jounin Commander had not called him out. Besides, Kakashi had only been spying—or perhaps watching attentively—for a little over an hour.

What he saw had been rather fascinating.

Uzumaki Naruto and Hyuuga Hinata were teaching an Inuzuka to wall climb. And in a record amount of time! As a genius, Kakashi was aware of the properties of chakra and the theory of proportions and how someone with a small chakra pool would have an easier time grasping chakra control techniques. Those same principles had allowed Kakashi to speed through an Academy graduation with perfect chakra control over his small reserves. And now, he was seeing a clumsy and impatient boy master a shinobi technique that most genin struggled with simply because their chakra capacities were large enough to make it difficult to grasp.

As long as these kids kept climbing walls or trees, they were going to be a jounin-sensei's dream team. The only bummer would be the vast disparity between Clan children graduation and civilian, but Kakashi was not inclined to care about that. Statistically speaking, civilian shinobi were rare because they rarely possessed greater than average chakra reserves and they possessed no outside assistance or unique talents that made them suitable to shinobi life.

Kakashi noticed a sudden change in atmosphere on the rooftop and conversation had died down up there. Naruto, clearly the instigator, was standing up while all the other kids were watching him make a series of wild gestures—it was a damn shame that the low lighting made lipreading impossible without using Obito's gift. Kakashi watched his brother nod thoughtfully a few times and settle a few disputes with an unspoken authority that all of the other children unconsciously responded to. The Aburame and Hyuuga seemed to listen, while the Inuzuka was having difficulty containing his excitement. Finally, Sasuke and Shikamaru stood and appeared to be pointing a few things out to Naruto before Shikaku's boy obviously took charge because suddenly the group was deferring to him.

Finally, Inoichi's girl stood, tapped her own chest with a thumb, and scurried over the edge of the building and disappeared indoors. Shikamaru moved to the edge of the roof with Kiba, Naruto, and Hinata following like ducklings before the group disappeared over the side. That left Shino, Sasuke, Neji, and Minato dropping to the ground

like an ANBU team waiting for a signal.

Kakashi knew several things; Naruto had come up with an idea, Shikamaru had refined it, and they were all working together seamlessly toward a goal Kakashi was afraid to predict.

The men were all sitting outside lazily and mostly relaxed. The Ino-Shika-Cho combo were lounging together, while Shibi was bravely seated between Hiashi and Fugaku to facilitate conversation. Hizashi was chatting with a pretty looking Uchiha woman that Kakashi could not place off the top of his head. And off to the side, Itachi was sitting with a bored looking Hana. The evening was disrupted when the door swung open and a proud looking Yamanaka princess arrived with a platter that easily matched her in weight.

"I brought oba-san's anpan!" The call came and was met by nearly everyone rising to surround the table—not even the infamous Nara laziness was a match for Akimichi Shou's cooking.

"Thank you, sweetheart!" Inoichi called to the apple of his eye.

From the house, the women trouped out, with the Uchiha matriarch bizarrely looking after a Hyuuga babe. And while the women appeared to be setting up the buffet table, the looks they kept giving the men were certainly telling. They knew something was up.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Naruto's blonde hair appear with the others from his little group peering around the opposite side of the Nara home. At the same time, Kakashi saw Minato give a short nod before his group broke away from the house. The quartet reached the adults and branched off and started…whining? Kakashi felt a drop of sweat fall off his brow and he nearly fell out of his tree when he heard Minato—quiet little Minato—start complaining to Fugaku about being hungry. Kakashi's lone eye tracked the arrival of Shikamaru and Hinata sidling up to the others before a sudden roar had all the adults turning as Kiba and Naruto went charging toward the table screaming something about food. The boys lunged for the tray of anpan sending buns flying everywhere.

"What are they doing?" Kakashi asked to himself as chaos erupted.

Fugaku was trying to grab Naruto who proved more slippery than an eel as he evaded his adoptive parent's grasp. Chouza was desperately trying to snatch buns from the air and his erratic

motions had forced the other adults to dodge his clumsy efforts. From a distance, it looked like some horrible dance opportunity with Shikaku, Inoichi, and the Hyuuga twins dodging blows, while Shibi's insects swarmed the air and buns in a show of agitation. Then Inuzuka Hana was there lunging for her brother.

"Cho—ack!" Inoichi suffered an elbow to the gut.

While everyone occupied, scurrying behind the scenes like little rats—namely Hinata and Shikamaru—were hastily rubbing something over all the chairs that had been occupied by the group fathers. Kakashi's eye widened and he felt the irresistible urge to laugh. Everything, everything had been a diversion for this moment! The initial engagement with the anpan got everyone to stand, the four boys arriving had functioned to disarm the adults and allow Shikamaru and Hinata to approach without comment. And finally, Naruto and Kiba provided the perfect diversion to prevent some of Konoha's finest from noticing.

Well, Kakashi watched Itachi standing back to the side looking vaguely amused and far more intelligent than the crowd of idiots squawking over the profusely apologizing Kiba and Naruto. And in the back, the women were doing a poor job of smothering laughter and it was clear they had arrived at a similar conclusion to Kakashi.

Kakashi imagined the real apologies were yet to come.

He would wait until the group settled, dinner was served, and only then would he make his presence known. Except Minato waved to his tree from the edge of the area and Kakashi chuckled. Leave it to that kid to find him in a crowd.

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Hiruzen left the anxious Tsunade and fretting Shizune to settle into the reconstructed Hatake Compound that was mokuton construction at its best—Sarutobi had not enjoyed explaining the Tenzo situation to Tsunade. Jiraiya had been adding fuinjutsu seals to the property; some Kakashi had agreed to and Hiruzen knew his student would be adding a few extra tags in Minato's room. Where a jinchuuriki was concerned, a Kage could never be too careful. And Hiruzen knew that Jiraiya had already been placing seals around Naruto's new residence while the family was away. As far as the Hokage was concerned, it was just good sense.
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Hiruzen appeared at the edge of Nara territory and offered a wave to the Clan guards that looked to be harmlessly engaging in shogi, but were actually armed to the teeth and deadlier than most shinobi in the village realized.

Sauntering in from the rear, Hiruzen was treated to the sight of a complete Clan gathering where all the ladies were helping the children dish up their food while the men sat in a group of chairs looking almost winded.

Uzumaki Naruto whipped around faster than anyone and sprinted away from an exasperated Mikoto running full tilt. The Sandaime braced himself and swung the gangly boy into his arms.

"Jiji! You made it! All the moms made food and it smells great!"

"Sandaime-sama, welcome to my home." Nara Yoshino arrived just a step behind Naruto.

Opening his mouth to greet the woman, the Sandaime paused at the sound of tearing fabric. A second later, shocked exclamations resounded from the collective mouths of the adults in the vicinity. From a nearby tree, he heard a distinct spluttering and laughter. Sarutobi Hiruzen had partaken in the fighting of countless battlefields and witnessed things both horrific and magnificent, but nothing quite like this.

Feeling like he was caught in one of Jiraiya's novels, the Sandaime stared aghast at some of his village's finest male jounin gripping exposed backsides with their hands, while the women smothered their shock—likely their laughter—behind their hands.

"Naruto-kun, get over here now!" Fugaku shrieked not unlike a little girl, while Mikoto laughed out loud to the shock of all around her.

"Got you! Glued you all!" Naruto cheered from his arms, the blonde obviously not sensing the surge in killing intent coming from the crowd of irate fathers.

"Naruto-kun, how would you feel about some ramen?" The Hokage had already turned around with the blonde in his arms, knowing that a bare-assed, homicidal Fugaku would probably *not* follow them immediately.

“Why Jiji?” Naruto sounded too genuinely perplexed.

“Because a wise shinobi understands the importance of a tactical retreat.” Hiruzen murmured before executing a few well-timed shunshin that lost his ANBU tail for a few moments. Dropping Naruto, the Sandaime sliced his finger efficiently and performed a rapid series of seals. “Kuchiyose no jutsu.”

A small monkey poofed into existence and tipped its head quizzically.

“Tell Uchiha Mikoto that I’ll return Naruto later tonight after things cool down. You’ll find her at the Nara residence.”

The non-verbal primate saluted before swinging itself agilely to the rafters of the nearest building and disappearing into the night.

“Jiji, teach me to do that! Please!” Naruto hugged his knees and stared up at him so hopefully.

Thankfully, the faithful ramen stand owner stepped in to rescue the floundering Kage.

“Oi, Naruto? Is that you?”

“Heck yeah it is!” Naruto disappeared beneath the stand flap and clambered onto a seat, already spreading the tale of his elaborate prank to the owner.

Hiruzen slid his pipe into his mouth and lit it. Maybe he would ask Koharu to handle Hiashi when the man inevitably filed a compliant. Or he could just let Mikoto sort out the man if he proved an obstacle.

Whatever, right now was about Naruto.

“So how have you liked living with the Uchiha, Naruto-kun?”

It was a loaded question and it got more than Hiruzen was inspecting. Naruto was animated, lit up, and happy. The Sandaime had seen smiles, but they had lacked the nutrients to really sustain joy. This Naruto that he was seeing here was transformed.

It hurt knowing he had made the wrong choices for the

boy's life up until now. It made Hiruzen wonder if he was doing more harm than good by keeping Naruto's past a secret. Seeing how well Tobirama's descendent was adjusting made the Kage wonder, but seeing Naruto smile made the Sandaime doubt.

The boy was slurping down his third bowl, had barely come up for air, and was already raising his hand and begging for another. The Sandaime saw two different faces; one with hair as red as a Sharingan and another with an even spikier halo of blonde.

Uzumaki Naruto…I wonder who you'll be like.

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The man studied the scrap of parchment, frowned, and crumpled it into his palm before dropping it into the embers of the fire to burn away to nothing. The orders were clear, all there was to do was spread the word.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it took so long to update. I lost a furry family member and spent two weeks on the couch binging netflix at night instead of writing. Everyone copes in different ways I guess. Hopefully it didn't impact the quality of this chapter for anyone.

Thank you to everyone who takes time to leave kudos and reviews. You guys inspire me. Love you all!
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Chapter 11: Preparations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hiruzen giggled perversely into the latest edition of Jiraiya's book. An ANBU in the corner twitched but was otherwise unobtrusive, so the Sandaime ignored the unprofessional display. Picturing Tsumi's luscious bod, he shifted around in his chair to alleviate some tension south of the border, and turned the page.

"Hiruzen!" The bark of command had him jerking upright, scrambling to cram his book into his drawer, and yanking nearest report into place in front of him.

Hiruzen grabbed his pen just in the nick of time. The door swung open with an ominous bang to admit Koharu, who looked to be in a particularly foul mood with a curled lip and a sheaf of paperwork tucked under her arm.

"Koharu?" He did his best to paste on an inquiring face. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"If you're quite done reading that trash your student writes while pretending to be doing paperwork—" Koharu whipped out a senbon and speared the top of the paperwork he had pulled out—which was tellingly upside down. "—we have more important problems to deal with."

"Would you care to sit down?" Hiruzen inwardly cursed his misfortune as he gestured to the chair across from him.

"Your stall tactics won't work on me, monkey boy." Koharu smashed the stack of paperwork onto his desk and glared at him with such fury that he felt sweat bead along his body. "I've observed the Academy and reviewed academic files going back the last several years. Do you know what I found, Hiruzen?"

It would be imprecise to suggest that the Academy had been the focus of his attention in the last several years. Securing the borders and maintaining the image of Konoha's power in the face of the other great shinobi nations had been the Sandaime's priority within an hour of the Yondaime's final breath. Rebuilding the lives of his people and staving off poachers had taken precedence over all else.

This was not to say that Hiruzen had ignored the Academy; on the contrary, he reviewed the graduates' files and assembled them into promising teams. But it was certainly possible his diverted attention may have led to a few mishaps.

"I'm sure you'll enlighten me," Hiruzen said after the momentary lapse.

"That Academy is a disgrace to everything Tobirama-sensei worked for." Puce was a horrid colour on Koharu's cheeks.

Hiruzen flinched backward as she rounded his desk, and stood hurriedly to head her off.

"You are going to appoint me to an appropriate position to make some changes. And I am going to find *alternative* positions for the majority of those useless fools!"

"I'm sure it can't be as bad as you're thinking," Hiruzen replied, trying to puzzle out what could have riled the typically immovable woman. "And I thought you wanted to retire. Isn't that why you asked to be put into an advisory role only?"

"No one gets to retire from service, Hiruzen." Koharu sounded exhausted for a moment before that too disappeared beneath her anger. "Something you understand better than anyone."

"Quite." Hiruzen scratched his head distractedly as he eyed the framed photograph of his dead successor on the wall. "So…why do you want to run the Academy?"

"Because someone needs to get the house in order." Koharu's knuckles flexed in a telling manner. "And I'm not only willing, I'm overqualified to handle the situation."

"If it was as bad as you propose, more of our genin would fail during the chunin exams." Hiruzen was becoming concerned with his twitchy friend's health at this point.

"You cannot judge the standards of the Academy in relation to potential jounin sensei. Did you know our students often graduate with little to no understanding of Konoha's relations with the other great nations, which in turn causes problems in the field. I've found more than a dozen formal complaints from jounin-sensei stating their genin responded inappropriately in field situations based on ignorance."

“I don’t recall seeing those.” The Sandaime frowned.

“Allow me.” Koharu rifled through a stack of paperwork before shoving some pages under his nose. “Here are the complaints that were submitted and duly filed away by chunin Academy teachers without passing them to you for review.”

The Sandaime paused. Such an action could be considered insubordination by intentional subversion of the chain of command.

“What about the upcoming graduating class?” If there was a concern to be had, it would be with that group.

“After observing physical training, I surmise that in a pure taijutsu encounter, only four of 37 candidates would outlast an average, adult civilian in a fight.”

“Four?” Hiruzen blanched. “Civilians?”

“Indeed.” Koharu’s tone was clipped and irritated. “All clan children. And all of them taijutsu specialized.”

“What about factoring in the use of jutsu?”

Koharu faltered in her pacing, but tapped her chin for a moment. “Difficult to say since intelligence is the mitigating factor in these situations, but even the children with clan backgrounds are not reliable indicators of anything.”

“Are you saying that shinobi families have become complacent?” That notion seemed ill-advised and misplaced.

“To be frank, yes.” Koharu finally took a seat but motioned to the bookcase.

Hiruzen quickly obliged and retrieved a pair of sake cups and poured each of them a generous portion of amber-toned liquid, as replacement for what Tsunade had stolen.

“Could it be that perhaps you’re looking at this based on what *our* childhoods were like?” Hiruzen knew better than to press hard, but the question was an important one.

“Perhaps,” Koharu allowed, “but I’m not asking for our children to be ready to take their first life at five like you and I could have. I’m saying that a green genin should possess enough stamina to

last longer than five minutes sparring, have actual knowledge of the village they've agreed to die for, and have some manner of skill when they come out of the Academy."

If Koharu was not exaggerating the situation, the Academy would certainly need an overhaul. Hiruzen swallowed the burning liquid and folded his hands pensively. He did not want such young children to have to face the horrors of the battlefield until they were ready, but what good was an Academy that failed to adequately ready students to defend themselves?

Shoving away from his desk, he went to the window and looked out and down upon his people. Small babes being carried by smiling mothers strolled the streets. Vendors bartered with shoppers in a friendly fashion, while off-duty shinobi were visible thanks to the gleam of their hitai-ate. Joy was the theme of Konoha. There were still scars from the devastation following the Kyuubi's assault, but recovery had come quickly and the evidence was nearly gone.

Further along the street, Hiruzen could just make out one of the rookie genin teams working to complete a mission. The jounin-sensei had hinted during oral reports that he did not think his team would be participating in the upcoming Chunin Exams in Suna or in the next round hosted in Konoha. Hiruzen had not given it much thought, but it did raise a disturbing number of questions and gave credence to Koharu's findings.

"I want a detailed report on what you find," Hiruzen said finally. "And your proposal for alterations to the Academy itself. If things are as poorly off as you suggest, and if I feel your suggestions are beneficial, I'll approve them. I will not authorize instruction in jutsu outside the Academy three, however, without special permission so don't ask."

"I understand the dangers of teaching ninjutsu to students with no hope in passing. But we hardly require jutsu to create a solid foundation of learning." Koharu's voice dropped to a whisper. "Danzo suspects."

"How much?" Hiruzen appeared to continue watching his people go about their lives below, while in actuality the Hokage wracked his brain for potential solutions.

"Danzo is aware that there are details you have not shared regarding Senju Minato, but he remains unaware of said details. Since

I'm likewise ignorant, I'm unable to compromise whatever secrets you're keeping about the boy."

Hiruzen detected no bitterness or resentment that Koharu previously would have felt at such a sleight; instead, he heard nothing but acceptance and that…was progress of a sort.

Kami help them all if Danzo learned the village was in possession of two jinchuuriki.

"He is displeased by your decision to allow Hatake to retire from ANBU." The Sandaime shrugged. The occasions that Danzo saw eye-to-eye with him became less frequent with each passing season.

"Hardly a surprise."

"Yes," Koharu agreed. "But he has intimated to me that perhaps he is aware that my allegiances have changed."

"Not even Danzo could publicly make a move against you." Hiruzen placed a hand on the old woman's shoulder and met her blank gaze. "You know that I would not allow that?"

"I do not fear Danzo or his subordinates turning on me."

Koharu shook her head. "Displeased or not, Danzo won't move against me as long as my interests lie in securing a safer Konoha. As such, he has stated that he would support a nomination for me to take control of the Academy. I'm completely safe, but I'm also not privy to Danzo's meetings as often as I once was."

"He has stopped calling you." It wasn't a question.

Koharu inclined her head gravely. They shuffled back to the desk and had another drink together.

"You need a successor, Hiruzen," Koharu said at last.

"I know," Hiruzen murmured into his drink, "but I can't retire yet."

"Preposterous." The fight had gone out of Koharu, who was visibly weary. "Make Jiraiya take the role. Danzo will speak out against him, but your student would have more than enough support to silence dissent."

"Unofficially, I've selected the Godaime Hokage." Hiruzen

spilled the beans casually, taking no small amount of joy in seeing his old friend straighten.

"Who?"

"I can't say." Hiruzen swallowed his bitter drink. "But I can tell you that the candidate is unaware of the selection and is not yet ready to take the title at this time."

"Huh." Koharu poured herself a third cup, prompting the Hokage to recover the bottle and slide it out of reach. "Trying to spare your next successor the impromptu promotion that Sensei dumped on you?"

"It wasn't dumped on me," Hiruzen protested. "Tobirama-sensei had been preparing me for the role for over a year. Maybe longer. It's the reason things didn't fall apart after we got back from Kumo. Even though I wasn't ready, I wasn't unprepared."

"How long do you have to hold out then?" Koharu stared into her sake blankly.

Hiruzen automatically reached for his pipe.

"Eight years."

"What?!" Koharu choked, bending in half as she hacked up a lung.

"A fine vintage requires extra time to ferment and enrich the flavour." Hiruzen smiled wryly. "A shinobi requires the same delicate handling."

"Damn it, Hiruzen." This time Koharu's face lit up and lost over a decade of age as something amused and pleased overtook the old woman's features. "Whoever you have decided on had better be worth it because keeping you alive is a trial on its own."

"I'm not so bad, am I?"

"No, you're worse." Koharu rose firmly and pointed to the door. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

But he was already rising and stepping around his desk to tuck his old friend's arm under his own.

“We’re going for lunch,” Koharu announced as they stepped outside, under the attention of a dozen chunin and genin standing around the mission desks. “You can come back later to bury yourself under a stack of paperwork. For now, I want you to tell me about how Tsunade reacted to Jiraiya’s accommodations.”

“I would love to,” Hiruzen murmured as they vanished and reappeared a short distance away near one of the more discreet dining locales the Sandaime frequented. “Laughing is supposed to help you live longer…at least that’s what I heard once.”

“Sounds fishy if you ask me.” Koharu sniffed. “But I suppose a little laughter is amenable.”

“Good thing too, because I doubt I’ll be smiling much in a few days?”

“What’s in a few days?” Koharu asked as they entered the restaurant and made for seats in the far back.

“The Raikage moved up his visit.”

“You can’t be serious?” Koharu shot back, genuinely shocked. “And they didn’t inform you?”

Showing up early was likely to catch them flat-footed and unprepared to host potential enemies.

“It’s worse, actually.” Hiruzen could always count on Koharu to respond favorably in tactical situations. And with a stroke of luck, perhaps the two of them could sway Danzo into a cooperative effort. “I received a message by hawk just over an hour ago. They are already on their way.”

“Meaning we have much to do in order to prepare the village.” A low voice spoke from behind.

Hiruzen turned, completely unsurprised by Danzo’s sudden appearance at the table. With a beckoning hand, he gestured for his old friends to take a seat.

Koharu shifted over to allow Danzo to seat himself next to her. There was a brief silence interrupted only by a waitress briskly serving tea before making herself scarce.

“I’ve been expecting you, old friend.” Hiruzen feigned

interest in the menu while speaking, hyperaware of the intense scrutiny he was under.

"You know why I'm here," Danzo stated calmly.

"I know what you're offering and you know I'll accept," Hiruzen said, resolute. "The visit was not anticipated for another three weeks, and so many of our jounin and my ANBU are out on missions."

"No doubt Kumo anticipated we would have fewer shinobi stationed in the village if they moved up their time table." Koharu scoffed.

"The real danger is whether Kumo is using the Raikage's visit as a scouting mission for a future attack or for a potential acquisition." Hiruzen rubbed his head slightly. Such a pain politics were.

Certainly, they could refuse the Raikage's visit, but doing so would make Konoha appear weak before the Elemental Nations. Weaknesses were something his village could ill-afford for the moment.

"The obvious target of choice is Senju Minato." Koharu expressed what they were all thinking just to clear the air. "But they boy's security is practically impregnable at the moment. It would be folly to make a move on him."

"I tend to agree with Koharu." Hiruzen the names off his fingers. "Hatake Kakashi. Jiraiya. Tsunade. All three of them are sharing a roof with the boy. All three are S-ranked across the board. Removing Minato from his current residence would not only be strategically unwise, but impossible with those three protecting him."

"I agree with you, Hiruzen, but there is a flaw in that line of reasoning," Danzo replied while calmly sipping his tea.

"Oh?" Koharu challenged subtly. Hiruzen waited for confirmation of what he already suspected.

"During the day, the boy is sometimes in the care of other, less powerful shinobi." Danzo replied. "At times, he is left under the supervision of Uchiha Mikoto, Hyuuga Hiashi, Tsunade's apprentice, or Uchiha Shisui. All A-rank with the exception of Shisui who is proving himself to be an upcoming A-rank contender."

And there it was. Undeniable evidence that Danzo was aware of Minato's movements and had placed some sort of guard on the boy.

"But abduction while under supervision is exceedingly unlikely and increases the risk of failure by a high margin." Hiruzen frowned, lost in thought.

"But look at the company the boy keeps," Koharu offered. "The village jinchuuriki, the Uchiha Clan Head's son, Hiashi's daughter—the list goes on."

"Kumo holds jinchuuriki and kekkei genkai in high regard." Danzo spoke tonelessly. "My agents have intercepted several of Cloud's retrieval teams exiting Kiri with children."

The implication hung over the table and left enough information without drawing up specifics.

"How many children have survived the bloodline purges, Danzo?"

"Enough."

There was not even a flicker of denial in Danzo's eyes. Hiruzen felt his heart shudder in silent mourning.

"I see." Hiruzen rubbed his eyes. "How many infants?"

There was a pause.

"Three."

"You can keep the rest, but send the babies to me. I'll find them clan families to raise them." Hiruzen's anger brokered no objections, and though Danzo looked displeased, he refrained from commenting. It was almost a pity because Hiruzen was rather hoping for a reason to grill his old friend.

"Should we expect any other villages to make a move?" Koharu asked. "It's a rather convenient opportunity to cause our village to lose face."

"We must prepare for any possible eventuality," Danzo interjected. "Even striking first."

"We are *not* assassinating the Raikage." Hiruzen shot down

that idea before his old friend could think about it too much.

"Contingency plans are good to have," Koharu muttered before quelling under the weight of his glare. "I'm not suggesting we murder the Raikage; I am suggesting we have a back-up plan in case another village forgets their place and makes a move."

"I will not condone a course of action that could lead to the ruin of Konoha." Hiruzen's lips curve upward with the barest hint of a twinkle in his eye. "But I am willing to entertain suggestions to manage the situation in creative ways."

Danzo was a wily rat, of that he had never doubted. Still, Hiruzen would have to have a long conversation with him once all of this mess was resolved. The sooner, the better.

"Well then, what better way to manage a diplomatic clusterfuck than baiting an irresistible trap." Koharu smirked in that self-satisfied manner that sent chills racing down his spine.

"You're proposing we move up next week's festival so that it overlaps with the visit." Danzo looked almost pleased. "It's a risky move, but it presents us an opportunity we cannot afford to pass up."

"All the better." Hiruzen drew out a blank scroll from his robes along with a fresh pen. "Shall we get started?"

Sometimes a deal with the devil was necessary. In this case, Hiruzen was unsure exactly which one of them most qualified for the role.

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"You're favouring your left," Minato called sharply, ignoring the sweat dripping into his eyes.

The pair of them had spent the last twenty or so minutes dancing back and forth across a calm stretch of river that lacked any notable current. Occasionally a green or coppery brown shape would dart beneath the clear surface, but with a high sun and dark shadows looming on the placid surface, the fish were making themselves scarce.
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"Got it!"

Smooth as a cat, Hinata shot forward with her palm extended in a thrust meant to incapacitate.

Minato felt himself smile in spite of his exhaustion. He let his forearm catch the blow, lowered his center, and followed up with a reverse kick to the abdomen.

The blow knocked Hinata off-balance. She staggered, sinking a bit below the surface, before the girl's kickass chakra control had her rebalancing atop the water.

"Breathe for a second." Minato panted softly.

Twenty minutes of sparring would have been a joke to a seasoned genin, but his body was young and did not have a developed musculature or prior training. Some things, like familiarity with chakra control, gave him an edge. But while he may remember every kata of the taijutsu style he utilized as a Namikaze, he couldn't use them.

"I think I can last ten more minutes," Hinata said in between gasps.

More than enough time and it was an improvement of five minutes from when he taught her the chakra control exercise.

"Then let's push ourselves, Hinata-san." Minato staggered back into a ready position that Kakashi had shown him. "Let's give our friends a good show."

Neither of their friends were actively watching, but the words worked their magic and hardened the resolve in Hinata's eyes.

"Minato-kun, let us fight!" Hinata's arms might have been shaky, but the form was a classical opener for the Gentle Fist style.

"Very well."

Minato rushed her; doing otherwise would be an insult to Hinata's strength. Rather than evade his attack, Hinata twisted and snapped her palm toward his abdomen. It took a deft flip to escape and he landed poorly, but land he did—only for him Hinata to pursue him gamely.

"Who is training you these days?" Minato snaked out of her way and

flipped backward to his feet to create some space between them. “Because something is different.”

Something in her form is much better. And the hesitation remains, but seems to have diminished significantly.

“Hizashi-sama has been kind enough to oversee Neji and I over the last few days.” Hinata spoke even as she raced toward him again.

That explained a lot. Hizashi was much more relaxed and that would surely translate into anything he was teaching—and to anyone.

“I’m impressed.” Minato narrowly ducked a palm to the face before smirking at the determined girl. “But it’s not over yet.”

Minato used his body’s impressive flexibility to drop and swipe Hinata’s legs from under her with a single movement. She collided with the surface of the water, sank, and rose again soaked and spluttering.

“Ack!” Hinata spat up a mouthful of water and looked at him miserably.

“Here.” Minato leaned down to offer her a hand, which she grasped thankfully.

Then, something unexpected happened. Hinata’s innocent nature morphed into a devious one, the fingers he was clasped tightened, and another palm dropped onto their interlocked hands. Minato felt his jaw drop as sweet, little Hinata flipped him into the water next to her.

The hands gripping him had released as soon as he was underwater so he came up coughing and choking. Before he knew it, giggles teased his ears and Hinata’s arm slid under his elbow to help him up.

“I didn’t know you had it in you,” Minato spluttered.

“Me neither.” Hinata’s giggles were infectious and soon he was laughing along with her.

“It’s a good thing it’s sunny out.” Minato nudged Hinata’s shoulder as they sloughed through the water to the riverbank. “But I think we scared the fish off.”

“Still isn’t so warm.” Hinata hugged herself miserably, shaking out her drenched hair.

“Yeah.” The breeze impacted their shivering bodies from behind and they both shuddered. “But at least we’re cold together, right?”

Hinata made an affirming noise, before her teeth began chattering.

Thankfully, Shizune appeared to have witnessed their plight because she suddenly materialized at the shore holding large, fluffy towels.

Thank Kami!

“Nee-san, thank you,” Minato choked out right before he was swallowed by the yellow fluff.

“Th-thank you, Shizune-san,” Hinata squeaked, now shivering. “We didn’t think we’d fall in.”

“Kids never do, but that’s why you have us old folks to look after you.” Shizune winked and Hinata turned an adorable shade of pink. “Jiraiya-sama is with Sasuke and Naruto just up there.”

Minato knew that, of course, but there was no sense in being rude so he thanked Shizune again and began the slow trudge up the grassy embankment with Hinata on his heels and Shizune trailing them.

“You should keep having Hizashi train you.”

“Ano, I don’t think I can ask that,” she replied.

“Why not?” Minato grimaced as his sandals squished wetly. “Ugh, almost to the top, Hinata.”

“My father doesn’t like it when I ask him for things.”

And wasn’t that just unbelievably sad.

“I see. Maybe you should tell him how you feel then.”

“Minato-kun is right, Hinata-chan.” Shizune had stealthily matched their pace and was now squeezing the Hyuuga girl’s shoulder. “It might seem a little scary, but telling your father how you feel is very important. I can tell your father loves you; he probably just doesn’t know how to show it. You’re going to have to teach *him*.”

“I..I don’t know.”

Sensing the necessity of an immediate diversion, Minato rerouted the conversation.

"Were some of those moves you used earlier part of your clan's techniques?"

"Oh!" Hinata sounded like she was coming out of a trance, but the new topic seemed to help her because she perked up and her voice regained confidence. "Yes. I'll be able to seal off chakra pathways on contact when I'm a little further along. Hizashi says my flexibility is acceptable and he is pleased with my forms."

"They worked great. You caught me a few times."

"Thank you." Hinata's reply was somewhat muffled from inside her fluffy cocoon, but they finally stopped at the top of the steep incline. Both breathed identical sighs of relief. "You are becoming good too. Has someone been teaching you?"

Sasuke and Naruto were a dozen paces away listening intently to the directions of a hunched over Jiraiya. The duo were nodding thoughtfully and exchanging eager looks. Definitely suspicious.

"Not exactly." Minato shot the pensive Shizune a quick glance, noting the way her eyes narrowed. "Tsunade-sama gave me a Senju taijutsu scroll. I've been trying to recreate the katas from there. It's interesting and it gives me something to occupy my time."

It certainly had been enlightening. The Senju style of taijutsu—quite different from Tsunade's aggressive, personalized style—relied on high dexterity to outmaneuver an opponent and inflict precise strikes aimed to swiftly disable or kill. Minato theorized the style was developed over a generation ago in an effort to mitigate the visual prowess of the Uchiha Clan. Whether it worked or not was likely dependent upon individual efforts, but the potential was there. And since Minato could hardly use the taijutsu style the favored as a Namikaze, he needed to adapt to something new.

It would have been easy to miss the tightening of Shizune's body or her harsh intake of breath, but Minato was watching for it and frowned at the anger easily evident on her face. It seemed odd that she was upset by such a thing.

"Scrolls? Hinata sounded upset and Minato was at a loss why. "But…isn't someone working with you?"

“Err…Kakashi has showed me some things,” Minato dodged the query lamely, trying to figure out why this was such a big deal. “But I’ve had time on my own now that I’m not living with Sasuke and Naruto so I’ve been working on other things.”

“Someone should be with you while you’re learning.” Minato lurched backward, finding Hinata doing the same as they stared at Shizune. She looked absolutely livid. “If you fell wrong you could be hurt! What was Tsunade-sama thinking? Giving you a scroll like that without any supervision!”

He really, really wanted to laugh it off and remind the woman that a jinchuuriki’s healing factor was absolutely ridiculous, but he might revisit that idea when he didn’t feel like he was in mortal peril.

“Oi, Shizune! Brats!” Jiraiya cheerfully called, obviously unaware of Shizune’s blossoming ire. “You want to watch me perform a jutsu too?”

Minato looked at Hinata. She looked right back. They both nodded, shucked their towels, and sprinted toward the Sannin.

Shivers or no, sticking around a temperamental female was just asking for trouble.

“We’re coming!” Hinata yelled.

They stumbled to a stop just as Jiraiya gave a big thumbs-up and rolled forward, his hair extending and taking on a life of its own. The large, spiky sphere rotated menacingly like an irate porcupine, much to Naruto’s whoops of jubilation.

A few moments later, the Sannin was back on his feet, hands thrust in the air, and hair retreating to normalcy.

“What do you think?” Minato’s show-off of a, former sensei was glowing with triumph and Naruto stamped his feet and all but screamed for joy. Even Sasuke looked interested, but in a much cooler, less rambunctious way.

“Freaking awesome! Awesome! Awesome!” Naruto hopped up and down waving his arms effusively. “You gotta teach me that! I’ll be freaking unstoppable!”

“It might be useful.” It was grudging praise from Sasuke,

but it allowed Minato to gauge whether his influence was of any benefit.

"Oho, you better grow some hair then, kiddo!" Jiraiya knocked Naruto's skull a bit harder than strictly necessary before leering at the crowd. "Your little girlfriend over there could pull this jutsu off, but you need a bit more hair before it'll work for you."

"Girlfriend?" Hinata sounded noticeably faint.

Jiraiya merely wagged his eyebrows at the poor girl and hooted.

"Noooo!" Naruto, oblivious to Hinata's embarrassment, was raking his fingers over his hair that Mikoto had trimmed a while back. "I've got to grow it out now!"

"Not doing that." Sasuke folded his arms defiantly.

"Maybe Jiraiya-sama could test our elemental affinities, then." Minato pushed the envelope just a bit, pleased when the Sannin lurched around with a frown.

"Eh, I think that sort of stuff is a little ahead of you." Jiraiya stretched his arms. "Live a little. And let's have some lunch. I'm starved."

"Oh come on, old man! We're way stronger than normal kids." Naruto was still grabbing at the ends of his hair. "I'm gonna have fire just like Kaa-san! And I'm gonna learn the Uchiha family jutsu and blow everyone away with how awesome I am."

Okay, what in Kami's name has been going on? I've only been out of that house for two weeks. Two weeks!

"Don't be an idiot!" Sasuke smashed his fist into Naruto's head, causing him to jerk back with a groan. "If anyone is going to have a Katon affinity, it's going to be me! You're adopted!"

"So?" Naruto groused. "I'm still gonna be the best Uchiha ever! And I'm gonna learn to summon cats!"

"Don't be ridiculous, gaki! Cats are definitely not in your future!" Jiraiya bopped Naruto on the head, which made him flap about like a headless chicken. "Summoning is way too difficult for tiny brats like you guys. You're not even Academy age yet. Bother me again when you're older."

“I would be interested in learning my elemental affinity.” Hinata spoke quietly, but there was a quiet confidence in the girl’s words. “Not many Hyuuga seem to use jutsu…I wouldn’t mind being different.”

Minato found himself feeling lighter and slung an arm around Hinata’s shoulder. Again, her cheeks flushed, but this time Hinata merely looked…happy. It was a good look for her.

“That’s right!” Naruto tapped his sandaled foot on the ground and bounced in front of the Sannin who was rolling his eyes and muttering nonsense to the clouds. “So teach us our elemental affinities, old man!”

“Forget it.” Jiraiya huffed.

“Don’t’ make me prank you, old man.” Naruto’s voice purred dangerously and Minato hid a gleeful smile when both Sasuke and Hinata exchanged glances with Naruto.

“I’ll think about it.” Jiraiya folded his arms mulishly, but cast a leery eye on the kids.

“Alright, settle down everyone.” Shizune seemed to have calmed down and appeared with a blanket and a large basket. “Picnic lunch.”

There was a moment of hesitation but Naruto made a motion indicating a temporary truce. Jiraiya breathed a sigh of relief when the kids turned to Shizune, but Minato knew it was far too premature; Naruto may be distracted by food, but it wouldn’t last and the blonde was incredibly determined when he wanted to be.

“Yum!” Naruto lunged toward the basket, but was easily evaded by Shizune, who allowed him to face plant in the grass.

“I’ll spread the blanket.” Minato reached for the checkered cloth and accepted it from a thankful Shizune.

“I’ll help too,” Sasuke offered, appearing next to him.

“Thanks, Sasuke-kun,” Minato replied.

“No problem.”

Together, they spread the oversized cloth, Hinata helped

deposit helpings of sushi and rice balls onto each plate and pass them out. Jiraiya was lazing about at the edges of their gathering, but accepted a plate with thanks from Hinata. Naruto was already gorging himself on his helping. Minato overlooked that detail. Children that starved had issues with food, after all.

"So, how is living with your family, Minato?" Hinata asked.

"I have to admit that things are different, but not in a bad way." He mulled over his thoughts on the matter. "Most mornings I wake up and I play cards with Tsunade."

Minato omitted the fact that he often woke up in the middle of the night when Kakashi had nightmares. Privacy was more of an illusion in the shinobi world, but he didn't want to spread Kakashi's sleeping problems to all corners. His older brother often woke covered in sweat and panting lightly in his oversized bed. Minato often climbed in, after he coaxed the weaponry from Kakashi's grip, and sat with him until Kakashi's heart stopped pounding and one or both of them fell asleep.

"Cards?" Naruto paused mid-bite. "I've never played before. Is it fun?"

"It can be." Minato nodded. "But if I don't play then Tsunade won't get up until much later."

"I wish I could sleep in still," Naruto murmured. "But Tou-san has been getting Sasuke and I up before he goes to work every morning to do stupid exercises."

"How are you going to get stronger if you don't learn the exercises, idiot?" Sasuke snapped.

"I just wish it wasn't the same all the time. It's so boring and all he does is yell at us and say how we don't want to be a disgrace to the clan. I'll show him!"

"Anyway..." Minato steered the conversation away from Fugaku's efforts to indoctrinate his children with clan propaganda. "Nee-san does my hair every morning." Shizune's eyes crinkled when he smiled at her. "And usually I read, train, or accompany Oba-san to the hospital or for lunch."

Minato loathed the hospital. There were few moments where he resented his new existence, but every time some old, sick

person pinched his cheeks and cooed at him, it took every ounce of his self-control not to whip out a kunai and stab the offenders. And if that wasn't intolerable enough, it bored him to tears when Tsunade asked him to come along. It was only because he knew it would benefit her that he caved.

"Pretty much every afternoon I spend with Sasuke and Naruto, but the location varies." Minato shrugged. "Sometimes we go to the park, sometimes they come to my new house, sometimes their house, and today, we're having a picnic with you, Hinata-chan."

"I miss Minato living with us," Naruto grumbled. "Even Gumhead and Itachi miss him."

"It's bad enough that Naruto sneaks out sometimes," Minato muttered, remembering how red-faced and furious Mikoto had been when she finally tracked him down. "That first time that Naruto disappeared after dinner, Mikoto had half the village shinobi looking for you."

"I was going to leave a note!" Naruto protested. "I'm just not that good with writing yet!"

"You would be if you didn't have the attention span of an infant." Sasuke muttered.

"Naruto-kun, you really shouldn't sneak out alone." Hinata's eyes had doubled in size and she looked visibly troubled. "If something happened to you, we would all be so worried."

"Not to worry, cutie-pie." Jiraiya winked at her, making her flush crimson. "Naruto's parents are police officers. Didn't Fugaku pick you up from our place the other night, Naruto?"

"Err…yeah." Naruto squirmed slightly, a haunted look glazing his abnormally bright eyes. "He wasn't very happy."

"It's why the dobe hasn't snuck out since then." Sasuke smirked while Naruto made a frustrated sound like nails on a chalkboard.

"You two should work on water walking after lunch." Minato motioned down the hill. "If Hinata and I can do it, you two should be able to figure it out."

"Ugh, but we've been falling in for days!" Naruto whined.

“We even tried practicing at home until Kaa-san yelled at us for bothering the fish.

“That isn’t so bad.” Sasuke plucked a strand of grass and started winding it around his finger. “At least you aren’t trying to eat them anymore.”

“That was one time,” Naruto protested.

“Koi aren’t for eating, Naruto-kun,” Hinata chided him gently.

Minato smothered a laugh and let himself fall backward to stare up at the large clouds in the sky. Life was interesting, especially this second go-around.

Not everything was perfect. The tension between Kakashi and Tsunade was becoming worse rather than better. If those two could just get past the infantile issue of sharing, Minato just knew things would improve.

Shizune really did behave like a big sister though. She helped him sort through his new clothing and habitually checked on him to see if he needed assistance with anything else.

Jiraiya, on the other hand, had been busy with peeping missions and bonding with Naruto, which suited Minato just fine since it kept the Sannin from getting to know him too well. And his friendships were intact despite his initial fears.

Life was pretty good.

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There were days he dreamed of what a family dinner would be like, but this exercise in dysfunction was not exactly what Minato had in mind.

Everyone was sitting around the dinner table for their meal. Minato held his chopsticks with a piece of shrimp poised just below his chin.

“This meal sure looks delicious.” One could see the
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impressions of Kakashi's lips forming a smile underneath his mask. "Thank you for your efforts, Tsunade-sama."

Minato jerked around desperately, but Tsunade was shrugging her coat off—Jiraiya-sensei was leaning in for a better look at her jiggling assets—and remained unaware of Kakashi's opening ploy.

"Psh, I've never cooked a day in my life and I don't plan on starting now." Tsunade retorted, her nose crinkling in distaste. "Shizune cooked, of course."

"My mistake, then. Apologies, Tsunade-sama." Kakashi put on the flattery a bit too strong and Minato nervously dropped his chopsticks, reaching for his glass of water. "I simply assumed that since I was away on a mission for the day, and Shizune and Jiraiya-sama were watching the kids, that you wouldn't leave the task of cooking to Shizune. My bad!"

Kakashi…what are you doing? You do realize that Tsunade's temper is Uzumaki in nature, right?

Though I suppose I really can't be all that surprised. These two have been acting like a couple of pre-teen girls in a pissing contest for the last two weeks. I suppose I should be thankful they haven't resorted to violence.

The sound of knuckles cracking had Minato downing half his water in one go.

"You look a bit tired after your mission today." Tsunade smiled sweetly. "Maybe you should do some reading with Minato to unwind. Oh wait. You'll probably be too busy at the memorial tonight. We wouldn't want to interrupt your quality time with a rock, now would we?"

Oh sweet Kami, why him?

"Speaking of quality time..." Kakashi lazily set aside his miraculously empty plate. "How was your appointment with Mara-san, today?"

"Better than I expected. In fact, we discussed techniques for stress management in our session today." Tsunade patted her fist with her free hand invitingly. "I'm sure you would benefit from a physical method too. Why don't you join me?"

“Speaking of physical activities.” Jiraiya said, shoveling large quantities of food into his mouth. “Minato and Hinata were sparring on top of the river earlier. I didn’t see all of it, but it looked like Minato has a good grasp of the basics of the Senju taijutsu style. Far from mastered, but I’m impressed that your forms were as recognizable as they were.”

“Thank you,” Minato said, his frown going unnoticed since the entire dinner table was caught up in themselves.

“I’ll have to teach you some of the Hatake style too,” Kakashi mused thoughtfully—totally ignoring Tsunade’s prior comment. “It’s incredibly acrobatic, but I have no doubt you can handle that. You’re definitely genius material, pup.”

Ordinarily, a compliment like that would have probably brightened his day, but Minato was becoming steadily more frustrated with the dinner table dynamics. Almost angrily, he turned his wrath on a plate of sushi and began devouring the contents of his plate.

“Such an advanced chakra control exercise at his age has potential.” Tsunade said from the side. “Maybe I should start him on medical theory texts earlier than I planned.”

Minato snorted. If Tsunade thought he was going to become a medic, she had another thing coming. Most shinobi had a basic comprehension of anatomy, but Minato had neither the temperament or the inclination to heal.

“I think a tracking specialist would be easier,” Kakashi suggested, causing Minato’s mood to sink a little further.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Tsunade scoffed. “That would be a waste of his potential.”

“A waste, you say?” Kakashi replied deliberately underhanded. “Our father was a tracker with a reputation surpassing even *your* legend.”

“I’m going to my room.” Minato hopped off his chair while balancing his plate in his hands.

“Minato?” Tsunade already looked apologetic, and he could see how Kakashi’s muscles had tensed and his fingers had cracked the chopsticks.

“Pup, I’m sorry I shouldn’t have—“

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

Minato massaged his temples before shooting an apologetic look to Shizune. She only shook her head in understanding.

“Brat, I…”

He shrugged off Tsunade’s attempts to placate him and Kakashi’s hesitant arm.

“No.”

Kakashi recoiled as if burned and Tsunade was bit her lip painfully.

“Kid…” Jiraiya started, but Minato snapped his arm out and was satisfied when his former mentor finally shut up.

“Fighting like this is something that someone my age should be doing.” Minato felt his tension ease as he finally spoke the words he had been longing to speak for several days now. “You’re both acting like this is a competition. Instead of being happy about building bonds with me, you demonstrate how dissatisfied you are by sniping at each other constantly. Both of you need to start acting like adults.”

Brushing past everyone, he paused as Shizune touched his shoulder lightly. Wearily, he looked up at her.

“I’m okay.” Minato breathed a sigh of relief when his seal warmed slightly in a silent show of support. “Look, my feelings for you both haven’t changed. I’m just disappointed.”

No one tried stopping him again. He climbed the stairs to his room and threw himself onto the bed with a solid thunk. The chakra in the wood was soothing and despite it being more than a few hours early, Minato felt his eyes grow heavy. He allowed himself to slip into sleep.

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Watching Minato walk away upset was hard. Not as difficult as the incident the day she arrived, but it still made her heart ache painfully. Tsunade was not oblivious to the pained looks the boy
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would sometimes direct at them, but perhaps she had been pretending not to see them.

She needed to become a better person. She would.

"Shizune, let's give Kakashi and Tsunade some time to talk." Jiraiya's voice sounded like he was walking on tiptoes. "Hime, we'll be back in a little while."

"Just a moment." Shizune was all business and Tsunade reached for her sake glass, only to have it torn from her grip just before she could grab it.

"Shizune," Tsunade hissed warningly. Kakashi made a movement that she couldn't decipher as he was too busy being stared down by her displeased apprentice.

"No." Shizune slammed her hands down on the table viciously, causing dishes to rattle. "Do either of you have any idea how intelligent that child is?"

The boy's intelligence was practically expected. Anything less would have been odd coming from the two bloodlines that gave him life.

"Of course." This was Kakashi's harsh reply and there was certainly some defensiveness that Tsunade did not appreciate.

Shizune hardly seemed to have noticed though. "Then surely you realize how hard this is for Minato. Do either of you put yourself in his sandals when he sees you fighting? From what little we know, that boy was put through hell until he arrived here. I can only imagine how he feels being caught between you two fighting over his attention like little kids. He nailed it right on the head."

Tsunade's lip quivered and she forced herself to count backward from five. *Five*. She didn't like being wrong. She hated feeling helpless. *Four*. Love wasn't an easy road. *Three.* Tsunade loathed Hatake for reasons that fell apart just by existing. *Two.* Shizune was right. *One*. She needed to get herself together here.

"Minato is certainly a genius, but he's also just a child. Don't bring him into the issues you two are having."

Shizune's retreating footfalls and the telltale slam of the door were perfectly informative.

“Certainly dramatic.” Kakashi’s words sounded tired.

“Doesn’t make what she said untrue.” Tsunade stood and glared at the table laden with dishes. “Let’s clean up while we talk.”

Kakashi was impossibly still for a moment and she half-expected the jounin to spout a lame excuse and run away. She already had three plates in her hands by the time Kakashi animated and began collecting cups to carry to the kitchen.

“You’re good with Minato, you know,” Tsunade finds herself saying without thinking.

“I’m not.” The denial comes swiftly and Tsunade sees a glimmer of that self-loathing that she knows all too well. “I just follow his suggestions.”

“Come on, Hatake,” Tsunade murmured, shaking her head to convey her disbelief. “I’ve watched the two of you together. The brat seems to just like being around you; reading, practicing with shuriken, and just sitting together.”

“You’re acting like he doesn’t do things with you.” Kakashi emptied the glasses and began loading them into the dishwasher. “He has made at least three trips to the hospital, the two of you play cards every morning, and he puts up with girly outings that I certainly wouldn’t have the patience for.”

Tsunade loathed pretenses. “Kakashi, cut the crap. We both know that you’ve had a problem with me since I arrived here. Maybe even before.”

Kakashi didn’t reply, but he did not have to. Tsunade understood the meaning of his silence well enough.

“And I don’t really blame you for it,” Tsunade conceded grudgingly. Hearing the other man whip around was incredibly satisfying though. “Earning back trust after it’s lost is…difficult. But I’m trying to improve myself and get back on my feet, for Minato’s sake more than my own. But I don’t think you’re really upset for any of these reasons.”

“Of course, I am,” came the hoarse reply. “When you made him cry, it reminded me of all the times I failed. I’m not going to let anyone down again.”

“You’re like me, then, kid.” Tsunade brushed past the stunned jounin and fished a bottle of sake from the drawer, ripped off the cap, and took a long swallow. “You can’t let go of the past, but let’s be real, Hatake. You and I have had shitty lives.”

“Maybe.” Kakashi whispered cautiously, and he reminded Tsunade of an old dog that had been kicked one too many times.

“And we were holding ourselves together with willpower rather than anything solid.” Tsunade felt like a therapist, but she had a begrudging respect for them after Mara seemed bored by her threats. “And suddenly this kid comes along and you remember what it’s like to feel something other than hurt. You’re afraid to lose him, Kakashi. I know I am.”

“You’re not wrong.” Kakashi had taken a seat on the edge of the countertop, face angled away.

“Jiraiya told me that you aren’t happy with us being here.”

“Can you blame me?”

“Honestly, I can’t. But Minato doesn’t deserve to have us behaving this way. And both of us need to realize that the other person isn’t trying to take him away.”

“I know. I think we need to agree to try and get along.”

“It won’t be easy.”

“Probably easier than infiltrating Iwa was.”

“Touché.” Tsunade admitted. “When did you do that?”

“Two years ago.” Kakashi sighed. “My psych eval came back shit and so I was an obvious choice to send.”

Sacrificing a shinobi on the brink of self-destruction was not exactly a common practice, but it was considered a necessary evil after a fashion.

“Huh.” Tsunade lifted her drink in a silent salute and actually smiled. “Guess things haven’t changed much, then.”

It was quiet, and then Kakashi started shaking. Slowly at first, but Tsunade frowned and watched the movement to make sure the man wasn’t seizing.

A muffled snicker escaped before a full round of raucous laughter disturbed the air. Unwillingly, Tsunade's lips twitched and, soon enough, the both of them were holding onto the counter while laughing wildly.

"We don't have to like each other now, do we?" Kakashi questioned with a note of humor in his voice.

"Don't be ridiculous." Tsunade giggled. "I still think you're a cocky brat with dramatic tendencies and disgusting reading habits."

"Oh good." Kakashi smoothed his impossibly spiky hair. "Minato won't be surprised then."

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Coming abruptly awake after sensing a murmur of chakra, Minato cocked his head in concentration. It took him barely a second to identify the familiar energy creeping outside his window. Glancing to the clock, he uncurled from where he had been snoozing for the past hour and yawned sleepily. Barely a moment later, a shadow darkened the floor and the window slid back.

"I was under the impression that impromptu visits were more of Naruto's thing." Minato grinned slightly as Sasuke clambered onto his desk.

"I was bored." Sasuke grunted, bending to tug his sandals off before crossing the room to flop down on the bed next to Minato.

"Bored?" Minato couldn't help but raise a skeptical brow.

"Kaa-san says the police force is working extra hard to get ready for some special visit coming up." Sasuke complained. "So Tou-san is hardly ever home, Itachi is always busy with his genin team or training, and Naruto is working on writing with Kaa-san right now."

"And you decided to sneak out?" Naruto certainly was rubbing off on the other boy. Minato was not sure whether he should be dismayed or delighted.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"I didn't say that." Minato rolled over and shook his head with a smile, earning a chagrined, tentative grin in return. "I just
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think you're probably going to regret it when Itachi shows up."

"You think he will?" Sasuke sounded so impossibly hopeful that Minato just laughed.

"Of course." He sat up and stretched like a lazy cat. "Itachi has little brother radar!"

Sasuke grunted noncommittally and Minato tilted his head to take in the way he was curled up with a lonely, sad look on his face. He bit the inside of his cheek and sighed in understanding.

Sasuke was feeling neglected. It was clear that Sasuke really did not resent Naruto, but that did not stop the boy from missing the attention that he normally would have had. And it didn't help that Itachi and Fugaku were occupied from dawn to dusk.

"Come on, scoot up to the head of the bed," he ordered, before tiptoeing across the floor to the bookshelf stuffed with dozens of novels Tsunade had purchased with Jiraiya's cash. After scanning the selection, Minato found the story he was searching for. He returned and crawled up next to Sasuke.

"What's that?" Sasuke asked from where he was comfortably situated on a throne of pillows.

"What does it look like?" He waved the book back and forth in front of Sasuke's face for Minato to sit down. "Now budge over."

Sasuke grumbled but he made space for Minato to sit down.

Minato settled in and stroked the cover reverently. In the back of his mind, he could see Kushina's proud smile as she rubbed her pregnant belly.

"This is, *The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja*." Minato explained quietly. "The first time I read it, I couldn't put it down. Who knows, maybe you'll like it too. I'll read it and you can listen."

If Minato had been uncertain about how attention-starved Sasuke was, he wasn't after seeing his eyes light up at the prospect of a story without pictures.

Opening to the first page, Minato began to read.

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Less strenuous ways that would not inspire horror in his Clan Head, is what Shisui was no doubt implying.

"Truly the spirit of a genius at work." Gai extended a thumbs-up and dazzled Shisui with his undispellable genjutsu that Itachi had yet to decipher.

"Err…that." Shisui smiled crookedly before zipping over to where Itachi was and linking their arms. "I'm going to have to borrow Itachi now…family dinner and all. Have a good night, Gai-san!"

Itachi frowned as their location shifted to the edge of the village.

"You could have allowed us to exchange goodbyes."

"It would have taken you forever," Shisui replied. "And I couldn't risk sticking around for too long. Prolonged exposure to Gai is detrimental to my mental health. Not sure how you've stayed so...Uchiha.

"That reminds me! Has Fugaku figured out that your extra training hasn't been with your jounin-sensei?"

"That would require Tou-san to actually see me."

Itachi frowned. He had not meant to say that. It was troubling that he lost control so easily.

Of course, Shisui had always noticed things about Itachi that his family never had.

"I thought things were getting better." Shisui's voice seemed pained.

Itachi swallowed down the hurt he had so carelessly exposed and purposefully leapt to the rooftops, bounding forward.

"Hey!" Shisui called out indignantly before he matched Itachi's stride. "You can't avoid me forever."

Itachi ignored him. He paused near the middle of the village before looking vaguely in the direction of his clan's compound. Deliberately, he turned and headed west.

"Okay, now where are we going?" Shisui groaned, exasperated. "Because I swear, we are *not* stopping at the sweets store,

okay? I ordered a new tanto and it cost ridiculously more than I thought it would! And I'm not dipping into my savings. Your sweet tooth isn't worth it! So, don't even think about trying to get me to buy you more!"

Itachi's lips twitched. "Did you order a chakra conducting blade?"

"Obviously! Wouldn't be a point in spending extra money on something that wasn't crafted from superior quality materials by a master blacksmith."

Shisui huffed beside him; Itachi wondered if his cousin realized that he puffed up like a turkey every time he was trying to show off.

"Wait a minute! You're just trying to trick me! Where are we really going?"

Itachi tipped his nose into the wind and saluted a squad of ANBU that really ought to be stealthier. If Gai could conceal himself from Itachi in that hideous jumpsuit, surely their black ops squads could be a bit more inconspicuous.

"Itachi!"

Persistence was an Uchiha trait, but Itachi sometimes thought Shisui took it far and above typical obsession.

Finally, he sighed, broken down by the constant badgering. "Sasuke."

"Sasuke? Oh. Really? How do you know?"

He was not about to explain something so basic. Instead of answering, Itachi closed the last bit of distance with a burst of speed that left Shisui choking on roof dust. With an elegant flip, Itachi landed on the outskirts of the property.

Tsunade was lounging in a chair on the porch while Kakashi sat with his back to Itachi.

"You have grass in your hair." Hatake Kakashi spoke without looking up from the orange he was peeling with nimble fingers. "Twigs too."

"Your observational skills are as keen as they say," Itachi

replied serenely.

Tsunade guffawed while Hatake perked up slightly.

"Wow! I hadn't seen your new place, Hatake-san!" Itachi did not flinch even when Shisui bowled into him. "Can I go inside?"

"Nope." Kakashi said cheerily.

Somehow, half of his orange had vanished. Jounin really did have odd quirks.

"Bu-ut?!" Shisui spluttered, looking every inch like a kicked puppy.

"May I have permission to retrieve, Sasuke?" Itachi did not bat an eyelash at Tsunade turned to look him over for a moment before dismissing him.

"Tch, go ahead. It's nice having an Uchiha around that actually has manners." She waved him inside.

"How long has Sasuke been here?"

"Hmm…couldn't say." Kakashi eye-smiled, obviously knowing but refusing to divulge the information for one reason or another.

"I'll be back momentarily."

Itachi vanished inside and climbed the stairwell. He paused outside the room where he heard Minato's voice. It had been several days since he last saw the boy and Itachi was pleased to be able to ascertain his wellbeing. Not that he did not trust Hatake Kakashi or Senju Tsunade, but he knew that boy often put up a front that served some purpose that Itachi had yet to determine.

Knocking once, he waited.

"Come in, Nii-san."

Ah Sasuke. Definitely irritated too. Perhaps he should make some time for his little brother while their father was too busy to forbid Itachi from "wasting" his training time.

Opening the door, Itachi took in the scene. Sasuke sat in a nest of pillows atop the bed and glared out the open window, while

Minato was slid a bookmark into a book and turned to stare at him patiently.

Itachi found himself smiling helplessly. His little brother was impossibly adorable when he was upset.

“Minato-kun, I’m pleased to see you looking well.”

“You too, Itachi-kun.”

Minato twisted around and squeezed Sasuke’s arm. It was curious to see his stubborn little brother change when his friends were around. Naruto kindled a competitive flame that even Itachi had no hope of matching; Hinata drew out Sasuke’s tolerance and patience; and Minato was like magic. He always seemed to know what to say, or what not to say to coax a favorable reaction from his prickly, little brother.

Sasuke obediently swivelled to look at Itachi though his downcast body language clearly showed he wanted to do anything but. The sadness in that look, however, pierced Itachi straight to the heart. Itachi had failed: Sasuke was hurting.

Crossing the room in a blur, Itachi dropped down, poked his little brother on the forehead, and smiled.

“I’ve been busy training, Sasuke. I’m sorry that I’ve not been able to spend time with you. I promise that I’ll make time later.”

For the first time, Sasuke appeared anything but reassured by his words. There was a resentful grimace on his brother’s lips, and he looked ready to start screaming—except Minato moved and calmingly took Sasuke’s hand.

“Bottling it up isn’t going to help, Sasuke.” Minato’s words were more effective than Itachi’s feeble attempts at comfort. Sasuke jolted, and pressed on his friend’s hand almost desperately.

“Tell him how you’re feeling.”

Itachi was not sure what he was expecting, but it was not what happened next.

“I feel like you care about the clan and training more than you do me!” Sasuke belted out, his anger and resentment far too aged for a child so young. “All you do is say *later!* Later! Later! And later

never comes! Why can't you spend any time with me?!"

Itachi found a lump forming in his throat. What use was being a genius if he could not prevent the suffering of the person he loved most in this world?

"Sasuke, I— "

Itachi stopped himself when scarlet eyes turned on him, before meaningfully turning back to his friend.

"Forgive me, Sasuke. I've been blind to your suffering."

"What?" Sasuke looked up, clearly startled.

"You're right." Itachi reached out and gently put his hands on his brother's shoulders and the youngster's expression become utterly gobsmacked and somewhat terrified. "I haven't been the brother you need me to be. Sasuke, I promise that I'll spend tomorrow afternoon with you."

"You promise?" Sasuke threw himself into his arms with an earnest expression, more forgiving than Itachi deserved.

"I promise." And he meant it.

"Thank you, Nii-san!"

Itachi rose with Sasuke in his arms, taking in the way Minato was watched them with bemused eyes. Silently, Itachi mouthed a thank you to the boy who simply nodded once.

"Goodnight, Sasuke," Minato called as Itachi turned. "Next time use the front door. I might have locked the window."

"Doors are boring." Sasuke declared, his body squirming in Itachi's arms as he waved to his friend. "The book wasn't too bad. We'll have to finish it next time!"

I'm afraid your efforts to sneak are useless, Sasuke. Wherever you go, I'll find you.

"Ugh. Kakashi is bad enough, Sasuke! Don't you start too! I'll see you soon. And don't forget to ask about the festival."

"Mom already said yes."

Itachi rolled his eyes.

“Goodbye, Minato-kun.”

Retreating to ground level, Itachi noticed Tsunade was curiously absent and Hatake was watching Shisui rub his backside with a pained hiss.

“Did I come at a bad time?” Itachi asked with a blank face, inwardly smirking.

“Eh?” Shisui’s hand was paused on his butt with a frown. “What?”

Kakashi obviously had picked up on the joke right away. “What can I say, Shisui took it like a man.”

“It hurts!” Shisui whimpered.

“Ugh.” Sasuke’s apparent good mood evaporated. “Did you have to bring that Gumhead?”

“Stop calling me that!” Shisui pleaded.

“Let’s go.” Itachi nodded to Kakashi. “Thank you, Hatake-san. Please pass on my apologies to Tsunade-sama.”

“What did you do now, moron?” Sasuke grouched.

“You have no respect for your elders, you brat!” Shisui hissed.

“I do. Just not you.”

“Will do.” Kakashi shooed them off, nose buried comfortably in his book.

There was blessed silence for a few moments as they took to the rooftops.

“Itachi, this isn’t the way home.” Shisui said. “Where are we going now?”

Itachi smirked. “I have a craving.”

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Fū unfastened the worn strap of her sandal with a frown. Her home was poorly lit, but she was in no hurry to turn the lights on. In truth, her mind was elsewhere.

"I don't understand." Fū mumbled uncertainly as she stared up at the massive insect hovering near her behind bars. "A bunch of people are after us? They're going to kill me to get you?"

" I'm afraid my information is limited to what that overgrown fox was willing to share. But I believe the danger is real."

Choumei sounded troubled in a way that the stilted, cheerful bijuu never had during their previous encounters. This frightened Fū more than she was comfortable admitting. Everyone in their village was afraid of her—or rather, they were afraid of Choumei inside of her.

So, what did it mean if Choumei was afraid?

"I believe you." The Nanabi had never been anything but amicable, if a bit resigned. Besides, her bijuu was the only being that willingly interacted with her. "But what should I do? I don't know what I should do."

Choumei did not answer her right away. Instead, Fū gnawed at her thumb and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"I have an idea. You won't like it—I don't like it. But it's probably our best option."

"I'll do it. Just tell me what it is!"

"We need to leave Taki."

Fū blinked. She found herself surprised by how afraid she was and just how hesitant she suddenly felt.

"I won't make you, Fū."

"I know and I'll go." She had given her word. In all the books she had read, that was of particular importance. "I'm just afraid. I've never been away from the village before. I don't know what I'll do."

' 'You're not by yourself. Lucky Seven Choumei will help you."
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''You will?''

' **'I will. Pack nothing obvious. If you do, that will arouse suspicion. Just make sure you have anything you want to take with you ready when they dump you at the training field tomorrow.''**

'I can do that!' Fū paused. ''How are we going to escape? And…where are we going?''

''Just trust me. I'll tell you later.''

Unsurprisingly, Fū warmed to the idea. ''Okey doke.''

After leaving the shared space in her mind, Fū prepared herself a meagre dinner from the kitchen stocked with basics. All the while, her thoughts drifted to her dreary little home and things she might want to slip away with.

It depressed her to realize that there was nothing; no photographs, no personal belongings. She had never received a gift unless one counted the shinobi gear that had been provided for her education.

All she wanted to take with her were the books that she had stolen over the years. Fū felt horrible about the theft, but she would never have been permitted to purchase them. So she had *acquired* them on her own, over the years. Perhaps she could not take all of them, but her favorites would have to come with her.

Suddenly Fū, felt inexplicably lighter and found herself smiling. Maybe this was like an adventure. Maybe this dangerous situation was actually an opportunity in disguise.

Fū gasped. Maybe she could be like one of the girls in her favorite story!

And just maybe…she could make some friends.

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Danzo arrived quietly.

Representatives from all the clans were standing at
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attention in honour of the Raikage's visit. This included members of the civilian council and the Hokage's advisors. Koharu, now truly Hiruzen's agent, was standing just in close proximity to his old friend.

Homura, on the other hand, was standing near the periphery. Danzo joined the other man who acknowledged him with a tight nod.

"How did it go?"

"Hiruzen surprised me." Danzo scanned the area with feigned interest. "Nevertheless, I've made arrangements with our informants. Regardless of what transpires in the next few days, our little problem will be dealt with."

"How can you be so sure?"

Homura's cowardice was well-known to Danzo. It was one of the many reasons that Koharu's company had been his preference. Until recently, she had never shied away from doing what was necessary.

"The good of the village outweighs all else. Don't tell me your resolve wavers now, Homura."

"I would die for this village," Homura hissed angrily.

"Good." Danzo's eyes flickered to where dust was kicking up in the distance. "Let us observe."

There was a deafening bang and the thunderous visage of the Yondaime Raikage and his entourage appeared right before the waiting Hokage who stepped forward to greet them.

"Raikage-sama, welcome to Konohagakure no Sato."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your amazing support. Hearing from you guys always brightens my day! You all rock!

I would like to say thank you to Synoshian for accepting the role as my beta reader. She's amazing and I'm lucky to have her!

Story notes you may find relevant:
Number One: The Raikage is technically present in Konoha, but

his role is going to be minor for the time being. Yugito and Bee will show up later in the story, but not right now. Yes, I know this is sad because all of these characters are a lot of fun. And yeah, no Darui or anyone we know and love until later.
Number Two: As far as the Sharingan goes, I intend to try and stick close to canon rules, but based on some implications by Black Zetsu, I may tweak a couple things.
Number Three: I only watched a couple sections of 'filler' so don't expect me to abide by filler junk. I understand there are a lot of people that love filler content, but I'm not one of them.
Number Four: I feel like the "Gai can't use ninjutsu thing" is something they decided in Shippuden. Sure, he's a taijutsu master, but he summons! So in my story, he might only make use of a few shinobi basics because he is a taijutsu master, but he isn't in the same situation as Lee.

Chapter 12: The Root of Conflict

Chapter Notes

> A big thanks to Synoshian for being the most awesome beta reader a person could ask for!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Danzo assessed each child standing in front of him with a critical eye. Two were freshly plucked from the streets of Konoha, eating out of a garbage can. Another was a frightened girl from the devastated Yuki Clan. And the last, a shifty-eyed boy that was acquired for no reason aside from larger-than-average chakra reserves.

"Process them."

The calculated declaration caused renewed fussing from all but the last child, but all were dragged away to begin the tedious process of building promising future agents.

Danzo retreated down dimly lit hallways to the table that served as his current desk, piled with small, neat stacks of reports. Danzo sat and scanned the top document, while making occasional notations off to the side.

Danzo had spent his life fighting for the safety and prosperity of Konoha. Of course, the definition of "safe" was constantly in flux and hardly represented an accurate summation of Konoha's state of being.

Konoha might be fine today, but tomorrow and the day after were forever up in the air.

"Danzo-sama."

The appearance of two bowed subordinates was expected and prompt.

"The preparations are successful?"

"The units are in place, Danzo-sama. And the festival location was moved to a training ground as per your recommendation to the Sandaime."

"Our agent?"

"Contact was established and your orders were verified and accepted."

Danzo nodded without any real concern. ROOT infiltration agents were chosen with considerable care and only after verifying unquestionable loyalty.

But all of this meant things were proceeding just as Danzo had planned. Any damage would be negligible, what with the location and sealing array that his agents had prepared well ahead of time.

Even Hiruzen's lack of ANBU presence made the timing of this enterprise all the more critical. And if the ANBU kill teams found Orochimaru…all the better. Konoha having a stray missing-nin made them look weak before the other nations.

"Has the Hokage spoken with anyone?"

"We do not believe so. While ANBU operatives have been alerted to prepare for a potential disturbance, Hatake is no longer part of that chain of command."

Better than Danzo had hoped. Perhaps it had been rash to dismiss Hiruzen's practical side. This would make Danzo's plans easier to accommodate and prevent blame from being publicly directed his way.

"And the Raikage's men?"

"Under surveillance as per your orders, Danzo-sama. Although the Raikage seems to be tied up in meetings with the Sandaime."

Good. With Hiruzen keeping A occupied, Danzo was free to act.

What was the loss of a few trees in order to preserve the life of the forest? This was not a question that Danzo struggled with; more or less, it was a way of life.

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The disgustingly temperate climate of the Land of Fire felt unnatural.

The road they were following showed signs of frequent travel and had deep ruts from merchant caravans passing through. The forests bordering each area on the road to Konoha smelled of pine and kept the air feeling fresh, lacking the thick smog afflicting some of the more industrial towns creeping into existence. Prolonged exposure to this grating peace was difficult for someone like Ishida Naoka, who had only ventured into the Land of Tree-Huggers when duty called.

Unlike its fiery cousin, Mist was perpetually damp with a constant, pervading sense of danger, not unlike the persistent fog that rolled over the islands. And if the lack of visibility was not enough deterrence to potential invaders, the creatures in and out of the water had the same bloodthirsty reputation the shinobi of Kiri shared.

In all her days, Naoka had never known peace. It was a word described by philosophers in books and whispered about in the dark corners of broken-down inns; a word her comrades tossed around over games of dice and mocked while the corners of their eyes tightened with strain. Such a ridiculous concept had no right to exist when she spent her days slicing the throats of old friends and robbing their corpses as she fled the purge order.

Now, during a foray into hostile territory that was remarkably lacking in hostility, the former Kiri-nin was reminded of that word as they travelled down a winding path where songbirds sang and butterflies flew.

The Mist had never been a particularly welcoming home, but it was home nonetheless. Naoka grew up catching frogs to put food on the table, and trained so that she could have a better life than scrounging for scraps or selling her body. People had looked at her pretty face and thick black hair and thought she would just be another Academy dead girl, but Naoka had persevered and risen through the ranks as a prominent member of Kirigakure's interrogation unit.

Although her mother was a scion of a prominent clan, ninjutsu did not draw the same fascination for Naoka as it did for others. Much of her success and prowess came from a surprising knack for seals she discovered while working with an old, lonely Uzumaki woman who survived the Uzushio slaughter and fled to settle in the neighbouring Land of Water. It had been slow going, but Uzumaki fuinjutsu was not a kekkei genkai. Naoka devoured the knowledge

ravenously.

And when her prowess with seals was still a budding concept, Naoka was whisked into interrogation, where she climbed the ranks until she was practically running her division.

And then one day, Yagura betrayed his people.

Naoka had not wanted the life of a missing-nin, but it chose her. Or rather, the Mizukage she had sworn her life to had chosen it for her. The sting of betrayal Naoka felt when she was forced to gut a kill-team sent to her home had been…unbearable.

Nevertheless, Naoka had grown up a survivor and that had not changed even after her country turned against her. So she sealed her life away into scrolls and slipped into the deluge that sheltered her from tracking parties.

As an elite-ranked missing-nin, Naoka often camped out of practicality. And her dwindling coin purse made foraging for her own food a necessity.

She hated this life that had been forced on her. Naoka wanted to find a place to settle down and make a life. But if she wanted that life…she needed money.

When a masked fellow dropped into her campsite last week, Naoka had instantly assumed a defensive pose. Except, instead of attacking, the individual unsealed a scroll with ten million ryo and the promise of another ten after the completion of a mission. Naoka hated herself for how quickly she had agreed.

Information was her bread and butter, so it galled her to think that so little information about this "retrieval mission" was being provided. It was the bare minimum of acceptability. While her client refused to name themselves, the instructions were to turn over the target in the Land of Hot Water for payment. The location itself was outside of Fire Country and lent credence to her assumption that Kumo was somehow involved.

But this job she had undertaken was a kidnapping from Konoha. Her employer's *lapdog*—for what other name could she bequeath to some masked messenger—had suggested that the majority of Konoha's ANBU division was deployed on special assignments outside of the village proper, making kidnapping easily possible.

And her target: Uzumaki Naruto. Apparently, one of the reasons Naoka had been specifically recruited was her sealmaster's ability to restrain a jinchuuriki. Not that she had ever tried herself, but there was certainly a reasonable level of expectation that Naoka *could* succeed.

When she had fished for more than basic information, she was rebuffed. Only information on the jinchuuriki's appearance, habits, and living conditions was provided along with a list of known associates. Strictly speaking, a mission from the Mizukage had never required an explanation, but the total rebuff from this new, shady employer just confirmed that the entire situation reeked.

Already she was beginning to regret that decision. Her travelling companion was a moron from Iwa who talked too much. If only she had the resources to pin the man to one of her interrogation tables and dissect him until he wept like the small-minded imbecile he was.

A-ranked assassin, Hoshi Chiaki, said the Bingo Book. What a joke. Most would mark her at the same level and she could have killed him over a dozen times in the last half-hour alone. It was a shame she needed him for there to be any possibility of getting in and out of Konoha alive.

Movement from the side of the road had the two travelling companions turning to watch a doe trot fearlessly onto the civilian path.

"Dinner is early!" The pug-nosed Chiaki smirked, dipping his hand into his pocket—only to falter when Naoka snapped a fist toward his head.

"What the hell was that for?" He dodged her blow with ease, a smile that was mostly a grimace twisting boorishly at his lips.

Naoka had little tolerance for fools. Instead, she pointed at the doe that was racing into the woods with a fawn close behind. His hooves clipped the ground behind his mother.

"Oh, come *on*! It's bad enough I'm stuck with some bitch for a mission, but don't tell me you're soft too."

Before he could blink, Naoka moved. A kunai kissed Chiaki's skin beneath his eye, leaving an attractive line of crimson running beneath the blade.

“What was that again, fool?” Naoka breathed into the man’s ear with a smirk playing at her lips. “You want to question my integrity as a shinobi?”

Not unexpectedly, the blockhead belted out a boom of laughter, scrubbing his chin with a meaty palm, but not making a move to push Naoka aside.

“Maybe you aren’t so bad after all,” his deep voice crooned. “I like my women with a bit of fire in ‘em.”

“I’m afraid it’s rather the opposite.” Naoka replaced her kunai in less than a second. “But I promise that my touch will burn you worse than any fire ever could. So, I’d watch what I said if I were you.”

“Kinky!”

Naoka did her best to ignore Chiaki's ridiculous chatter that, once started, spilled well into the afternoon. They passed a number of caravans, some with shinobi escorts and others without.

Naoka’s hitai-ate had been abandoned when she left her village. She had forced Chiaki to conceal his Iwa headband as well, much to his grumbling. Never had she quite understood why so many missing-nin flaunted their identities, but idiocy was hardly restricted to the untalented. Nevertheless, with the brand of betrayal safely put away, no one gave Naoka or her business associate more than an exchange of babbling pleasantries concerning the festival.

“How close are we to the village?” Naoka interrupted Chiaki’s rambling.

“The tree-huggers' village should be about two hours ahead. Why?”

“I think I’ve spotted an opportunity to borrow a better identity.”

“Ah,” Chiaki hummed in response, looking ahead with a grim smile. “I suspect you might be right.”

Naoka shifted and motioned toward the side of the road. The loudmouth had a troublingly shrewd look about him as he sauntered after her.

The sooner this mission was over, the sooner she could relocate to somewhere better.

Just off the road, a young couple had stopped with a wagon laden with fruit, canvas for a tent, and two ponies nibbling some stray grass. They were huddled around a campfire with a pot of streaming stew.

Chiaki extended a deceptively meaty palm. Naoka did not even blink at the two soft thuds of bodies hitting the ground, senbon buried in their necks. She wasted little time in sealing away the corpses, taking the seat the young woman had previously occupied, and serving up two bowls of stew. She offered one to Chiaki.

“Nice work.”

She grunted, sniffed the stew once, and took a bite. It was good, but Naoka could not afford to feel guilty for taking its makers' life. She had her own mouth to feed and no time left to feel pity for anyone save herself.

A few people passed them while they ate, but no one stopped them and their nondescript clothing afforded them a degree of protection.

“These are better disguises, but I’m still worried about getting into the damn village. I’m handy with chakra suppression, but if Konoha is decently paranoid they might have a sensor or two looking out for infiltrators.”

“You leave that to me. Come over here.”

Without waiting to see if he complied, she whipped out a specialized notebook containing expensive, delicate sealing paper that she immediately began tracing a design on.

“So, the rumours are true, after all.”

The previous cheer was missing from the man’s voice, leaving something almost appreciative in its wake.

“What are you on about, Hoshi?” She resorted to the same informality.

“There were rumours that Kiri’s best interrogator was a Yuki woman practiced in fuinjutsu. Only whispers, of course, but even

tales have to come from somewhere, right?"

Naoka deliberately refrained from answering, which seemed to amuse Chiaki more than anything.

"I left Iwa recently, but just before that, I heard another interesting story." Chiaki's lips thinned and his eyes adopted a reptilian glint. "One of our scouts observed a confrontation between a black-haired woman and a squad of Kiri hunter-nin. That scout said he watched the target do something to one of her attackers which caused him to turn around and attack his allies. The woman and her coerced ally slew the remaining members of the squad. And then, this woman slit the throat of the man she was controlling before fleeing the scene."

"So," she said dryly. With a flick of a wrist, she tore off the sealing paper before rapidly forming a second, identical seal. "I killed the men following me. What is that to me?"

"I'm wondering if the story I heard is true. If it is, that could be valuable for us during this op."

Naoka's lip curled. Who did this guy think he was, questioning her? This was why she never enjoyed working with other people.

"You talk too much, but I assure you that any talents I have will be put to good use." Briskly, she finished the last bite of stew and abandoned the bowl on the ground next to the fire. "After we arrive in Konoha, one of us needs to meet with our contact while the other sets this civilian operation up at the festival grounds."

"Sure thing."

The buffoon waggled his fingers in her face in a distasteful manner that she deliberately ignored as she applied one of the seals to her hip.

"I've drawn a seal for each of us that sort of muffles our chakra. If you use any ninjutsu techniques, the seal will cancel so I would advise against it."

"Ah." The idiot turned the paper over in his hands curiously. "But if we already know how to suppress our chakra?"

"Concentration is fallible; one slip and your ruse is over.

Seals are reliable, safer, and more effective. This seal will evenly suppress your chakra throughout your body instead of compressing it into one specific place."

"You think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

"My opinion of you is not a concern of yours." Naoka stood, doused the fire with a few kicks of dirt, and walked toward the ponies. "Your concern should be receiving payment from our employer. So, let's get this over with. The sooner we do, the sooner we don't have to interact ever again."

"I dislike pretending to be a civilian," Chiaki sneered.

"Also—not my concern." Naoka untied the reins and started leading the cart and horses down the road.

"This job stinks the longer it goes on," Chiaki complained.

"Let's just get there and get this done."

The remaining walk was a bit more unpleasant due to her companion's continued attempts to engage her in conversation. Thankfully, the gate guards on duty did a quick sweep of the wagon and its contents, and required only the entrance fee for visiting merchants. Naoka suspected the real inspection happened from above in a rather surreptitious manner.

Nevertheless, they were offered directions to the festival stands and sent on their way.

Naoka felt her eyes drawn in every direction at once and forced herself to focus when children continuously raced back and forth along the stretch of the streets. Just down the path from her, merchants haggled with their customers, children bounced around the parents with happy smiles on their faces, and most odd of all, nearly everyone she saw was unarmed except on-duty shinobi. The entire experience felt like walking through an ordinary town instead of a hidden village. If it weren't for the occasional flash of sunlight off a shiny hitai-ate, Naoka would have assumed they weren't in a shinobi village at all.

"Well, well," Chiaki murmured nasally from her side. "I think I found us a nice place to bunk down for the night."

Naoka turned just in time to watch a dark-skinned blonde

woman wearing a white vest disappear into an inn up the road. From a distance, she matched the description of their contact.

"I'll get us a room, sweetheart." Naoka dumped some coins into the Rock-nin's hands. "You set up shop for us, okay? We want everything to be perfect for tomorrow!"

Naoka slid her hand up to Chiaki's neck and tugged him close to her in a mimicry of intimacy.

"Of course," Chiaki purred in her ear, his nose brushing a bit too closely to her skin—almost like the kunai kissing the back of her spine. "You *owe* me, though."

"I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, I don't doubt that."

They disengaged and Chiaki guided the cart and horses in the direction of the Konoha festival grounds. Naoka swore to herself that, job or no, she would gut the sour man if he threatened her again.

Gaze flickering to the inn, she turned away and started navigating the crowd. She purchased a few token souvenirs without paying much attention. Just enough to keep her arms full and to appear as boring as possible.

Chiaki was correct, of course: Naoka was searching for a pawn to manipulate. She needed to find someone strong enough to be of use but weak enough to control. Decisions, decisions.

It was a shame, though. Konoha did not seem that bad of a place. People smiled often and laughed too easily.

Konoha was very different from Kiri.

Oh well. At least she would have the chance to enjoy it for today. After tomorrow, returning would not exactly be an option.

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Minato hated to admit it, but he was stressed. Now that Sasuke and Naruto were not enriching his life with their constant presence, Minato spent more time worrying. And Kurama had just finished having a chat with Saiken, so now his bijuu was snoozing
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away, oblivious to Minato's fretting. Probably for the best too, if he did not want a bijuu-sized headache.

But all he could think about was how much there was to do, and how little time there was to do it.

So as soon as Tsunade had gone out for a drink with Shizune, Minato waited for Jiraiya to step outside to write. It was something few realized about his mentor, but Jiraiya found buildings confining and would always gravitate toward the outdoors. A yearning for the outdoors or whatever you wanted to call it, Minato was pleased that old habits were still exploitable in his new present.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed, pup?"

Minato followed the lines of the basic storage seal he was practicing with. Intellectually, he knew every move required, but relearning calligraphy skills was another matter entirely. Another long look and he silently pronounced it perfect and carefully set it aside, lowered his pen, and turned to where Pakkun was tucked into an orange cushion on the couch with his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"Maybe, but I think you look more tired than I am."

"Yeah, well, today is my shift. Tomorrow is Bull's night and the next is Bisuke and so on. You're a bright pup. You get the picture."

"Uh huh. So, who was it that Kakashi didn't trust tonight?"

"Does it matter? No adults are in the house right now."

"Jiraiya is right outside."

"Kakashi doesn't see it that way."

"Don't I know it."

Minato chewed the end of his pen for a moment, tugged the clean sheet of parchment closer, and began to trace the outline of a second storage seal. This time, his fingers did not falter on him and the motion felt more natural.

"You got any snacks, kid?"

"You hungry?" Minato shot Pakkun a look, eyes crinkling when he saw the dog give a longing glance to where Tonton was curled up on a mat like the pampered pig she was.

“Very much so.”

Obligingly, Pakkun’s stomach growled.

“Oh, sure. Hang on.”

He finished the first pattern. Hopping off his seat, he trotted into the kitchen to raid the refrigerator. When he returned, he deposited a plate of leftover chicken in front of Pakkun. In seconds, the ninken had ripped into the meat.

“Sorry it's cold,” Minato said.

“It’s fine. Shizune-san knows her way around the kitchen.”

“That she does.”

Minato wanted to work on a more complicated seal, or at least one of his ideas that he dreamed up while sealed away. But explaining that away would be…difficult. With much muttering, Minato flipped open one of Jiraiya’s fuinjutsu journals that he had appropriated from the man’s room and flipped it open to a page on resistance seals. Minato hardly needed to look at the paper, but having an alibi in place was unfortunately necessary until Minato could create a proper spot to hide some of his *real* work.

Minato began applying an almost perfect copy to the sealing paper. His fingers were small and he kept overcompensating for his strokes a bit, but a few more days of familiarizing himself with his new writing style would correct those errors.

Mid-stroke, Minato heard the front door open. Instantly he dropped his pen and scrambled to pick up his scrolls, but it was too late to make a run for it. Tsunade stomped into the living room with arms full of books, Shizune and Jiraiya hot on her heels.

For a second, Tsunade seemed too preoccupied with dropping the books on the table, but Jiraiya—damn him—took notice.

“Hey, kid, aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

Busted, Kurama whispered unnecessarily.

Shut it! And aren’t you supposed to be asleep?

Worth it to see you get bossed around.

You're so…ugh.

Tsunade jerked up and instantly crossed to where he was cringing back. She stopped across from him with an unimpressed look.

"Minato!" Shizune looked scandalized and disappointed as she planted her hands on her hips. "It's over an hour past your bedtime! And Pakkun-san! You let him stay up?"

Minato's eye ticked and his hands balled into fists at his side. Not for the first time, he pondered why he had been returned to such an unfortunately young age. Considering all that he had accomplished, he knew he couldn't complain, but it still rankled him that bedtime was actually a thing!

"Someone had to watch the kid," Pakkun muttered as he finished cleaning the chicken dish.

Jiraiya smiled uneasily at the threatening glares he was getting from both women, looking quite ready to use a doton jutsu to sink into the floor.

"Well, I'm off, pup. Later."

A poof of smoke and Minato's distraction was gone.

"I couldn't sleep, so I'm studying!"

Minato smiled crookedly toward the trio of adults and prayed something good came of it.

"Is that so?"

Tsunade looked positively predatory as she skirted the table and tore his scrolls out of his arms. Minato *might* have squeaked in surprise, but he would be damned before he disclosed that detail to anyone—especially his friends.

"A storage seal?" Tsunade muttered.

With a snap of her wrist, the papers were flicked backward to nail Jiraiya squarely in the nose.

"Really?" Shizune looked reluctantly impressed, but her guarded smile morphed into a frown as she stared at the clock in the corner.

“This isn’t half bad.” The spiky top of Jiraiya’s white hair was visible behind the scrolls. “Better than some stores sell. This kid has talent.”

“Nevermind that. It’s past his bedtime.”

Tsunade rounded the table. Minato stepped back nervously.

“And the next time you want to stay up late, I have some anatomy books to go over with you. See!”

Tsunade pointed a red fingernail toward the pile of books on the table.

“But I don’t want to be a medic!” Minato cried.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

Tsunade completely disregarded his protests as she lifted him like a ragdoll in her arms. Minato sagged like a puppet with cut strings and let his cheek rest on Tsunade’s shoulder.

“And Jiraiya, if you had stayed in the house, maybe Minato wouldn’t have been up with only a dog for company. Don’t think we’re not discussing this.” Tsunade dispensed the criticism liberally before she whisked him upstairs and deposited him gently onto his bed. In a surprisingly smooth motion, the sheet and quilt were tugged over him.

So much for a little late night studying, Minato thought glumly.

“There we are, all tucked in!” Tsunade sounded elated and somewhat out of breath before she plopped down next to him, making room for Shizune coming up behind her. “Now, Minato, you’re too young to know what you want right now. Once you’re a little older, you’ll grow out of this rebellious stage and I’ll turn you into the finest medic in Konoha.”

“I want to be a ninjutsu specialist.”

His words fell on deaf ears.

“Oh, it’s not so bad, Nato-chan.” Shizune leaned down from behind to press a kiss to the top of his head. “Besides, even if you don’t become a medic, all of this information would benefit you as a

shinobi anyway. And you can't say a little first aid ever hurt. Wouldn't you want to be able to help your friends if they needed it?"

No, not really, because I'm a jinchuuriki, Naruto's a jinchuuriki, Hinata wants to be a medical taijutsu specialist even if she doesn't know it yet, and Sasuke will just have to dodge attacks because I'm not becoming a medic. And…medical texts are so boring. Ugh.

"I want to work on fuinjutsu," Minato grumbled weakly.

"Good thinking," Tsunade commented, doing little to ease Minato's nerves. "You'll need to learn yin-sealing techniques for some of the advanced healing exercises."

"Good night!" Shizune waved brightly before vanishing into the hallway.

Before he had sufficient time to feel sorry for himself, Tsunade's golden eyes were inches away, boring right into his soul.

"I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do." Tsunade looked improbably fond. "Just think about it, okay?"

"I promise."

My fingers are totally crossed, but I promise that I'll know how to splint an arm if it gets broken. Basic first aid is something I had to learn in ANBU.

Minato grinned as Tsunade swiped a strand of hair out of his face. There was an impression of lips against his forehead, and next thing he knew, the lights were flicked off.

"Good night, kiddo." Her eyes, even in this half-darkness, spoke for her: *I love you.*

"Good night, Oba-san." Minato half-smiled: *You too.*

And I never expected that to be true.

The door had barely clicked shut before Minato heard the telltale jiggle of the window. Half a second later, Kakashi poked his head inside.

"Yo!"

"Come on." Minato patted the side of the bed. "I know

you're only here to sleep for a little while."

"Is that so?"

Kakashi flopped onto the bed, obviously not in the mood for conversation. Minato rolled on his side and noticed the dark circles under his brother's eye and the smell of accumulated sweat. Minato slid two fingers down Kakashi's arm and pressed them over the man's pulse. The rhythm was settling down from frantic to steady.

"What are you doing?" Kakashi asked muzzily.

"Be quiet, I'm just checking on you."

"Keep this up and you'll be a perfect medic, pup." Kakashi's eye crinkled wickedly.

"Not going to happen."

Minato leaned over the bed, balancing carefully, and secured a cloth bundle in his arms. Kakashi watched him, but made no move to help and only quietly watched Minato unfurl the bundle and cover him with the blanket.

"Hm, pretty cozy."

"Good."

Minato yawned and curled up close enough to create a sense of nearness without smothering Kakashi.

"You could always do the nursing thing."

"Oh, shut up." Minato buried his head under a pillow.

"Your bedside manner could use a little work, though."

"Nii-san, go to sleep!"

"Fine, fine."

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layered in shadows and more than a few stumbles took place on the journey from house to backyard.

"I had not intended to provide instruction in the use of a sword for some time," Fugaku said with a completely neutral expression.

More like you hadn't planned to start teaching them at all, my love. But Kushina would want this. I just know she would approve.

Mikoto bit back a grin and slowly extended a bokken to Sasuke, who accepted the learning utensil reverently. In turn, she spied her Naruto—for once looking as serious as the clan that adopted him—accepting his own wooden blade from Fugaku.

"I never offered Itachi anything beyond a basic introduction to blade work," Fugaku continued, oblivious to his sons hanging onto his every word as if he were Kami himself. "But your mother interceded on your behalf. She suggested to me that you two are mature enough to handle such a weapon."

Fugaku pivoted and beckoned her imperiously.

Suppressing the need to roll her eyes, Mikoto stepped forward and tapped the hilt of her worn blade over her shoulder.

"This was a gift from my best friend. While I was never proficient in her art, she taught me every kata of the kenjutsu style she favored."

Already, Mikoto could practically see the drool running down her boys' faces and fought not to let her maternal instincts best her.

"I think both of you have the dedication to become masters of kenjutsu, but don't misunderstand me: it will be a difficult task that will require countless hours of training. But if you are willing to work hard, I will begin teaching you this in addition to the instruction you have been receiving in other subjects."

Mikoto smirked.

"But before you get too excited, there is a condition to your training." Mikoto cracked her knuckles and extended a lazy finger to point at her sour-looking spouse. "I'll only agree to teach you if your Tou-san grants me permission to do so."

It was a remarkable thing, witnessing a transition of thought. Instantly, the boys' prior giddiness was eclipsed by a mounting horror, and they gaped at Fugaku as if he were some obstacle to overcome.

“Tou-san, I—I mean, we— “

Naruto’s words fell apart as Fugaku shook his head, muttered something unintelligible, and trudged to the weapons rack to retrieve his own sleek, polished bokken.

“There was a certain incident at the Nara’s home a few weeks back.”

What little colour her sons had in their cheeks drained away. For the first time, Mikoto felt an itch to intercede, but knew that her boys would be better off in the long run if they learned this lesson the hard way.

“Such behaviour causes me to doubt your maturity and readiness to learn this art that is demanding for older and wiser students.” Fugaku folded his arms sternly and cowed both boys with a sour glare. “I want you to prove to me that you deserve this opportunity.”

Mikoto had expected Fugaku to blow up like a volcano after having his posterior exposed to the world. To her surprise, Fugaku’s ire had been supplanted by satisfaction at seeing Hiashi in such a panic. At the time, she expected a mere delay to his anger, but Fugaku had been utterly stoic and had not mentioned the incident since it occurred.

Until now, she supposed that pride had Fugaku pretending nothing had happened, since the gossipmongers had not whispered and stared as they were wont to do.

“We’ll never prank you again!” Naruto promised in a desperate gambit that Mikoto knew was doomed from the get-go. “And we’ll train more than Itachi does!”

“Tou-sama, please give us permission. We are your sons. We will not fail.”

Mikoto glowed with pride. Sasuke conducted himself properly and intentionally included Naruto in his statement. Pride and family all in one. It was a simple matter to see that Fugaku was

pleased with the response as well, but she knew that words were not the determining factor at play here.

"Very well, but do you understand that I will not permit you to change your minds? Once training begins, I expect you to drill daily and pursue a mastery in kenjutsu. Nothing less will be acceptable from my sons."

Mikoto watched her husband step forward and place one hand on each boy's shoulder, looking at *both* of them with pride and assessment. Her poor little Naruto looked almost overcome by emotion and was visibly trembling.

"I won't let you down, Tou-san."

"I'll make you proud."

Conviction shone in Naruto's eyes like a stoked fire and Sasuke looked almost frenzied with a desire to please. Kenjutsu was no longer just something to teach; Mikoto's boys *needed* this—and badly.

"Very well," Fugaku breathed and squeezed her hand. "Mikoto, make them strong."

"I will."

She would.

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The festival was situated on the huge, grassy expanse of Training Ground 15. It was impossible to miss, with hundreds of painted lanterns and the bustle of countless festival-goers. Crowds of people in vibrant kimonos were leisurely strolling down row after row of brightly coloured tents, stands, and a few large pavilions at each end of the grounds.

Minato was squished between Tsunade, who was wearing a fabulous teal and lavender kimono that Jiraiya would hate himself for missing, and Shizune, who was so nervous that she was plucking at invisible threads from her pink kimono. Minato had been shoved into a blue kimono with scarlet accents. Like usual, his hair was up in a hightail, minus his bangs.
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“We’re meeting the Uchiha at the shinobi festival entrance, right?” Shizune asked.

“Yep,” Minato replied as he scanned the crowd for familiar faces. “Mikoto-sama doesn’t want Naruto exposed to the civilian elements.”

“Just as well, then.” Tsunade was gruff, but her fingers had tightened into fists. “I’d hate to have to hospitalize someone.”

There was no rule saying civilians or shinobi couldn’t access each side of the festival, but certain games in the civilian zone banned shinobi for the same reason that some of the "games" in the shinobi zone forbid civilian entry. And of course, the split was important since vendors that catered to shinobi were far less likely to treat Naruto poorly while the civilian side was sure to kick him out or call him names.

Minato stretched out his senses for the familiar chakra patterns, easily dismissing ones that lacked a certain feeling.

“I can sense them just ahead. This way.”

“You can really find them in all this chaos?” Shizune asked.

“I could find you too,” Minato remarked. “I have to concentrate, but it’s not particularly difficult if I already know who to look for.”

Of course, Naruto was the easiest to locate just because he possessed Kurama’s chakra too—even if it was dormant for the time being.

“Minato-chan!” Speak of the devil: Naruto was standing with Sasuke, who was attempting to look aloof like his brother, and Hinata, who was shyly waving.

“Hi, guys.” Minato sauntered forward, offering a polite bow to Mikoto. “Mikoto-sama.”

“Oh, Minato-kun, it’s so nice to see you,” Mikoto greeted him kindly. “Fugaku had to work, but I’m sure he would say the same thing.”

Minato slipped around to where Shisui and Itachi were hiding in the back. Truly he had no desire to find out if Mikoto and

Tsunade were going to get along.

"Hey, little silver." Shisui demonstrated that he had learned nothing about personal space by hefting him under the arm pits and spinning him around. "I think you've gotten shorter, kiddo!"

"Nope, you're just taller." Minato grinned, estimating that his friend had gained at least two centimetres in the last little while. That, and his hair was almost back to its previous spiky length. "And your hair is coming in."

"I know!" Naruto groaned, coming up from behind to wrap an arm around his shoulders. "Hinata is going to have to gum his head up again!"

"No." Itachi surprised everyone by interjecting, looking almost…disturbed. "I refuse to listen to Shisui's whining anymore. You'll have to entertain yourselves another way."

"And I'm pretty sure Fugaku-sama would be disappointed if you started pranking again." Hinata chimed in, sympathetically patting the downtrodden Naruto's shoulder.

"Man…I guess you're right."

That seemed odd. Since when was Naruto hesitant to prank Fugaku of all people?

"So, what do we want to do first?" Minato asked, actually interested in the festivities around them.

"That!" Naruto whipped around and pointed to the closest tent, which boasted a shuriken-throwing game.

"Good." Hinata startled them all by walking right over. "Let's go!"

"Oba-san, may I have some money for the game?" Minato asked politely.

Tsunade smirked and tossed over a ridiculously heavy coin purse that Minato frowned at as he tucked it in his pocket.

"Jiraiya?" Minato asked without really *needing* to hear the answer.

"Minato, go have fun." Tsunade shooed him in the direction

of his friends and he obligingly arrived in time to see Sasuke claim the first prize of the evening: a spool of ninja wire.

“I thought you won prizes like stuffed animals at places like this?”

Naruto was frowning, though Sasuke was turning the wire over in his hands thoughtfully.

“Ano, in the civilian section of the games, they do offer many prizes like that.” Hinata twiddled her thumbs nervously. “But since this is the shinobi game section, most of the prizes are inexpensive items that shinobi actually use.”

“I approve,” Sasuke declared gravely as he pocketed his prize. “Besides, can you imagine all the traps we could make with wire?”

Minato looked uneasily between the sibling duo that were exchanging devious grins. Good grief, Naruto really was contagious!

“Do you want to throw shuriken too?” Naruto nudged his arm lightly.

“I’m okay, Naruto-kun. Let’s go to the next game!”

The next several stands included variations of throwing blunt kunai, a climbing wall, a "poison" workshop, puzzle boxes, and a chakra moulding game that Hinata destroyed them all with.

Sasuke had resisted the pony rides, claiming it was civilian and childish, but Itachi had thrown him onto the poor animal and proceeded to photograph all of them. They were all smiling by the end, with Naruto and Hinata practically needing to be pried off their respective mounts.

Naruto had demanded to get his face painted and Mikoto allowed it since the painter was foreign and did not recognize the blond. Naruto came out looking like a snarling tiger while the demure Hinata simply had blue flowers painted on her cheeks. Sasuke had outright refused and Minato had shrugged and tapped the markings on his cheeks.

Minato kept an eye on his caretakers, pleasantly surprised to see the three women engaged in conversation and even sharing a few rounds of laughter. Somehow, that bridge had been mended and

all he could do was feel relieved that one more obstacle had been dealt with.

Only one stand owner's expression clouded when he saw Naruto. But before Minato could hook his fingers in Naruto's top, the offender had teetered sideways and a peculiar blank look overtook his features. Naruto and Sasuke were so busy fighting over which floating rubber duck to choose that they never noticed Shisui's Sharingan fading away.

Minato had whispered an appreciative bit of praise to the Uchiha that had saved Naruto's night from being spoiled, but Shisui had merely tugged on his ponytail and bade him to go win some games.

When they stopped to admire a massive tent covered from floor to ceiling with flowers, a jubilant shout called to them.

"Hey, guys!"

The Yamanaka heiress was dashing their way, wearing a stunning crown of silky pink and white blossoms in a matching kimono.

"Ino-chan!" Hinata stepped forward with a bit of levity in her step. "You look beautiful!"

"You like it?" The blonde twirled cheerfully. "I *made* it! Do you want one too?"

Hinata never had the opportunity to reply because Ino whisked her into the tent in two seconds flat.

"What just happened?" Naruto rubbed his head.

"Something troublesome," a low drawl announced.

"Shika! Chouji!" Naruto raced forward.

"Good evening, Shikamaru-kun, Chouji-kun." Minato smiled.

"Hi," Sasuke mumbled without Minato's prodding. It was nice to see evidence of progress, even if it was small.

"Oh, Naruto! Are you going to enter the kids' eating competition? I'm getting ready to head over there with Pa. He thinks I

have a shot at winning."

"You bet I'll enter, dattebayo!"

"Wait just a minute!"

Ino came racing out of the tent, dragging a pleased-looking Hinata who wore a crown of snow-white orchids.

"I entered the junior flower-arranging competition. And I made something for all of you to wear."

Minato kicked Sasuke in the shin, causing the other boy to grunt but refrain from commenting. There was a nervous look on the blonde girl's face that served as an able reminder of just how young she was. In an effort to waylay any chance of hurting the poor girl's feelings, Minato bowed exaggeratedly, and was pleased to hear Ino erupt into giggles. Dignity was not something he had to worry about at this age.

"That was really nice of you, Ino." Minato smiled. "Thank you for doing that for us! What did you make?"

"Here we go!" Ino urged them all forward and Minato led the pack into the room, hearing the others fall into step with no small amount of muttering.

"Tada!"

Skipping around like an excited rabbit, Ino offered each of the boys a bracelet of braided leaves with a single flower each. Somewhat relieved that he would not be stuck wearing a gaudy coronet of flowers, Minato slipped his on and patted the scarlet-carson that noticeably matched his facial markings.

"It's really nice, thank you!"

"Wow, this flower totally matches my sandals!" Naruto was grinning ear-to-ear and was looking from his orange footwear to his flower.

"It's nice." Sasuke surprised them all by complimenting his own arrangement that was red with an accent of white and definitely an homage to the Uchiha fan.

"Yeah, it's actually really nice, Ino," Chouji admitted, his

lavender bracelet just managing to slide around his thicker wrist.

"Why doesn't mine have flowers?" Shikamaru looked at his wrist like it was a puzzle he could not quite make out.

"Because you're boring!"

Ino stuck her tongue out at Shikamaru, causing the rest of their little group to erupt into giggles that almost hid the Nara's grunt of displeasure.

"Look how cute you all look!" Yamanaka Mara appeared from around the corner wearing an apron and holding a pair of scissors. "Your friends look wonderful, Ino-chan! Good job making those gifts!"

"Thank you, Kaa-san!"

Minato watched their grown-ups enter and instantly engage each other in conversation. It was interesting to see Tsunade actually seem to straighten and pay attention to Yamanaka Mara. Naturally, he was aware that Tsunade was seeing the woman a few times a week, but witnessing the respect she had for Mara was another thing entirely. Instead of causing discord, it seemed like Tsunade was immersing herself into the shinobi community.

Tsunade really was getting better. Inexplicably, Minato shifted closer to his friends, not noticing the scrutiny from his core group.

"Err, so how about that eating contest, Chouji." Minato blinked as Naruto invaded his space, those blue eyes boring straight into his own. "You gonna come watch me win this thing?"

Minato blinked. It had not been his intention to worry his friends and he never wanted to see Naruto look so concerned over something that was a non-issue.

"I don't know. I think you both enjoy food, but winning is another matter entirely!" Minato teased gently.

"Come on, Minato-chan!" Naruto whined like a little puppy. "You're supposed to be on my side!"

"Friends don't choose sides." Shikamaru yawned and shuffled forward. "But I can't really make a prediction until I see what

they're serving."

"Well, I think I hear Pa outside. Hopefully we'll see you guys over there!" Chouji disappeared outside the tent.

"I want to go too!" Naruto glared at the floor.

"Then let's go." Shisui slid up with Itachi at his side, munching on a stick of dango. "If they want to talk, we can take them. Mikoto-sama, I'm taking Naruto to beat Chouji at the contest."

"I'm not fixing you up if you puke, kid." Tsunade ignored the way Naruto stuck his tongue out and crossed his arms churlishly. "But why don't you head over. We'll meet you after us girls catch up for a few minutes."

Ino chose to stay behind since they would be announcing the junior flower-arranging winners shortly, but Ino did make Hinata promise to come do girly stuff with her sometime.

Thankfully, it was a quick trip to the contest area. A surprisingly large gathering of youngsters were seated at picnic tables that were being covered with piles of dumplings.

"You guys, I'm so excited! I get to eat *and* beat everyone at something!"

"Naruto-kun, just promise to stop if you're feeling sick."

Hinata was studying the visible participants in the four-to-eight range with a sceptical frown that made her look much older than she was.

"Naruto will be fine." Sasuke intervened again with a haughty expression that was definitely learned from his father. "An Uchiha doesn't lose to anyone."

Minato sucked in a breath, realizing that something else was going on when Naruto jerked upright, looking pumped up with adrenaline and prepared for a fight rather than some recreational contest.

"Nii-san! Please take me up there! Please." Naruto turned the performance on Itachi and put his hands together. "With the stakes so high, there's no way I can lose."

“Very well. Come.” Naruto jerked when he received a poke to the forehead, but lit up then and followed Itachi to the picnic tables.

“Sasuke, what is it?”

It was rare these days that Minato actually felt lost, but something about this situation ran deeper than he realized. He suspected it was going to be something he was not going to like.

“Tou-san talked to us about upholding the honour of our Clan. It meant a lot to me. And I know that it meant a lot to Naruto. He doesn’t talk about it and I don’t ask, but I can see how much my parents mean to him. Having a family.”

Minato’s stomach rolled.

I thought I had finally gotten past all this. Why do I feel this way?

I’m here, Kurama rumbled.

Two words with so much impact. Minato bit his lip and swallowed, feeling surprised by how dry his throat had become.

“I’m thirsty,” Minato rasped, forcibly smashing his emotions down. “I’d like to get a drink.”

“Sure, kid.”

Shisui obviously noticed something was wrong. He was biting his lip and looked torn between wrapping Minato in a hug and giving him space. And because life was unfair that way, both Hinata and Sasuke were instantly alerted by Shisui’s peculiar behaviour and were now each in possession of one of his hands.

With little choice, he let the other three tug him toward the nearest stand, which happened to serve freshly squeezed juice.

“One juice—” Shisui yelped.

Minato and Sasuke both looked over to where Hinata was smiling a bit too innocently after jabbing Shisui in the side with… something they missed.

“What I intended to say was *three* juices, please,” Shisui stammered, rubbing at his side with a hiss and—was that blood?

“Thank you!” Hinata chirped, causing Minato to doubt everything about that last minute.

“I have two drinks here! It will be one moment for the last!” a feminine voice called out to them before plopping two fruit juices on the counter.

“I would like one too, please, Naori-san,” a smarmy voice that was all too familiar called from just outside the stand.

Minato zeroed in on the bandana-wearing man that had been so prejudiced against Naruto. Minato scowled, barely registering that Sasuke was scrutinizing him before glancing to the tokubetsu jounin with a taken aback look.

“It’s that loser from the Hokage’s office,” Sasuke growled.

“Ebisu?” Shisui looked perplexed. “What are you doing here?”

“Shisui-san?” Said jounin jerked backward as if burned. “It’s you miscreants!”

“Hey!” Shisui’s voice lowered dangerously. “You don’t talk to my kids that way!”

Ebisu adjusted his glasses with a sneer. “Are you the individual in charge of these demons?”

“You don’t talk about them that way!”

“Excuse me, is there a problem here?”

A gentle voice disrupted the verbal spar and Minato was taken aback by the exotically pale woman that could have been mistaken for an Uchiha if not for the sparkling amethyst eyes giving them all a considering look.

Ebisu looked absolutely horrified and was blubbering a series of apologies that the woman seemed entirely uninterested in listening to.

“Ebisu-san, you aren’t being mean to my customers, are you?” The woman turned an apologetic eye on the group, seeming to linger over each of their faces in turn, but not too long as to seem impolite. “My apologies. For your troubles, your drinks are on the

house!”

“That’s very kind of you, but we’re happy to pay.”

Shisui dropped an appropriate number of coins with an extra penny that had Minato raising a brow sharply.

“That is too kind of you.” The woman turned, grabbed a cup, and extended it toward Minato, who accepted it gingerly. “There you are, sweetheart! Enjoy! And Ebisu-san, why don’t you come help me prepare some more fruit as an apology.”

“Wow…” Shisui looked almost disappointed as the server dragged Ebisu out of sight for a presumed tongue-lashing. “She was…”

“Too old for you.” Hinata paused mid-sip, causing Minato to nearly choke at Hinata’s straightforward attitude. “She was at least in her early twenties, Shisui-kun.”

“Well, that is—so?” Shisui looked pained as they ignored his simpering and dragged him back toward the contest tables.

Minato guzzled his juice and led the way through the crowd to where he could see Itachi standing. Itachi acknowledged their approach with light pats to each of their heads and pointed to where Naruto was seated, a few feet away and next to Chouji. There was a mound of dumplings inches from his face. A few older Akimichi were present, easily noticeable due to clan markings, as well as a couple of Inuzuka girls who were exchanging feral glowers.

Shikamaru’s chakra was somewhere nearby, but for the life of him, Minato could not find the other boy in the crowd, so shrugged it off and turned back to where Naruto was preparing to dive headfirst into the tray of dumplings.

“Alright." A chunin was standing on top of the far end of the table. "On your mark, get set, *go*!”

“Go, NARUTO-KUN!” little Hinata screamed. Minato jerked backward and even Sasuke looked slightly intimidated.

Kushina would have loved this. You go, Naruto!

Minato finished off his juice and frowned at the restless crowd full of supporters. Minato could still see that Naruto had abandoned his seat and was sitting on top of the table in front of a

steadily decreasing stack of chicken dumplings.

Chouji appeared to have liked Naruto's idea because the rotund boy flopped himself onto the table and was alternating hands to further stuff his already bulging mouth.

"Go, Naruto!" Minato called. "C'mon Chouji!"

"You go, kid!" Shisui laughed.

"Naruto! Show them who the top dog is around here!" Sasuke yelled, an edge of competitive menace in his voice.

Minato supposed it was asking too much to banish clan pride altogether. In this particular case, Sasuke was coming to accept Naruto as an actual sibling instead of a live-in friend. If a little clan pride kick-started that instinct, he was all for it.

Win it for Kushina. Come on!

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Naoka handed the last customer in line a cup of juice before hanging a sign over the window that suggested she would be back in a few minutes. Of course, that wasn't the case, but it was the little things that really tied a good story together.

"Mph!"

She turned to the bumbling jounin hogtied behind the counter and tutted as the poor sap wriggled like a trapped rat.

"Tokubetsu jounin." Naoka took a step closed to the quivering pile. As a former interrogator, this persona was just another part of the art of information gathering. "I do wonder who you had to fuck to persuade them into thinking you were suitable material."

"Leaag Guu!" The cheap glass in the rickety frames of his glasses had cracked, revealing eyes that read as increasingly petrified.

At least she had gagged him. Having to listen to Ebisu's futile efforts to convince her to release him would simply be too much.

"I can see no accomplishments in your future, nor would I expect to."
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She paused. “But…”

Naoka plopped down next to Ebisu. “Your ambitions seemed to be tied into attaching your name to the success of others. And there is a certain logic in riding the coattails of more talented individuals to the top, but where is the fun in that?”

This man hated her. Naoka could see it now, churning in his eyes. But more than her, she could see that Ebisu loathed himself. Loathed his weakness. It was almost enough to make her sorry; after all, there was no order from her Kage. And there never would be again.

Life was an unfair bitch like that.

“I’ll show you a secret.” Naoka placed her hands on both of his cheeks, carefully minding the sodden gag, and let her chakra build and wash over Ebisu’s face. It took a few seconds, but soon the man was jerking backward. With a laugh, she released him and dropped her hands.

Ebisu’s cheeks had turned a light blue and the gag secured in his mouth had solidified as the water hardened into ice crystals.

“Like those dreams you have, I come from a special mother.” Naoka winked at the shaking shinobi. “But while I promise you that I’m skilled with my kekkei genkai, my true aptitude is my imagination. Because with my imagination, I can create this.”

Naoka slid an innocuous bit of folded parchment from underneath her kimono top, unfolded it, and kindly shoved it in Ebisu’s face for him to see.

“Do you see?”

A whimper. A distasteful sound that would have been beautiful under different circumstances.

“Of course you don’t,” Naoka continued conversationally. “This is a glimpse of power. Something someone like you will never understand. And something that someone like you is perfect for.

“Such a little thing,” Naoka whispered, tracing a fine line along the seal she had designed. “This wouldn’t work as effectively against someone with a will stronger than my own.”

Naoka reached around to where Ebisu's bound hands were and ripped the kunai from his fingers.

"Ebisu, my dear. I'm afraid I saw you coming."

Naoka took the wrecked sunglasses and flung them to the ground. If eyes could tell a story, oh, what a hateful tale they would share.

"I want to look you in the eyes," Naoka purred, using the man's own kunai to open the collar of his shirt and lay the paper seal over his heart. Through the sealing paper, she could feel his pulse racing out of control. "As this sucks your will away and replaces it with my own."

Naoka called chakra to her hand and smiled one last time.

"Now, I have a job to do, you have a distraction to make, and my partner has a kid to nab. So, we better make this quick!"

"Nnngh!"

"Just so you know, this isn't personal. You're just an opportunity for a payday that might get me off the streets and into a better life."

Naoka did not precisely feel regret, but she did feel remorse over the shoddy execution. Working for cash took away the majority of the satisfaction she may have gleaned.

"And come on, you should be thanking me." Naoka patted Ebisu as she called on her chakra. "When the Senju boy dies from a massive overdose of the toxin I dumped in his drink, you're as good as dead anyway."

Naoka noted the horror swarming the man's face, but soon enough her chakra crested.

"Fuin!"

Naoka was untroubled by how Ebisu slumped forward like a puppet with cut strings. With a flick of the kunai, she severed his bindings. He would not need them anymore.

"We good to go?"

Chiaki poked his head in, dressed in non-descript clothing

with the blank-eyed Kumo shinobi behind him.

"You tell me."

"We're good to go whenever."

"Very well." Naoka placed her hands together. "Commence the plan. I will direct the pawn and cause a distraction. Take the Kumo bitch with you. I'll direct Ebisu to intercept the ANBU escort."

"Alright." Chiaki tapped the hilt of his sword with a smirk. "Don't screw up, Ishida."

"I've already succeeded." Naoka shot him an unimpressed sneer. "The success of this mission is up to you now. *Don't screw up*."

Naoka did not enjoy harming children, but her instructions implied a monetary bonus if the drug was administered. So, when the boy showed up outside the stand, Naoka had not hesitated.

There was no time to feel sorry anyway. Time was up.

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"I lost."

Minato was doing his best not to smile as he patted the devastated boy's shoulder.

"Me too!"

Unlike Naruto, Chouji was literally sobbing so hard that his face was red and snot was coming out his nose. Minato felt certain that a garbage can was going to be needed in the next few moments.

Shikamaru was already approaching with a massive bucket in his hands that he promptly shoved into Chouji's arms.

"You both did a great job!" Shisui made an effort to cheer the two of them up. "And you tied! If that other Akimichi boy hadn't been there, you guys would have won for sure!"

"I wanted Tou-san to be proud of me." Naruto sniffed.

He will be. I am. And Kushina would be…I just know she would be thrilled.
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“I’m very proud of you, Chouji.” Chouza lifted the distraught boy onto his shoulder, looking entirely unfazed by the tears soaking his clothing. “Let’s go find Ma. Shikamaru-kun, you too. Good night, kids. We’ll have to get together so you can all play another day.”

They all waved goodbye, Naruto’s a little wetter and more emotional than the rest, but it was Itachi that dropped a consoling arm around Naruto’s shoulders.

“Tou-san will be pleased.”

“And I think you did an amazing job, Naruto-kun.”

Hinata sidled up closer to Naruto and Minato subtly pulled back. Minato felt inexplicably warm and shifted away from the bodies pressing close.

“Thanks!” Naruto seemed to perk up a bit.

Minato rubbed some sweat off his forehead. Maybe he just was not feeling well.

“You alright, kiddo?”

Shisui was frowning down at him, but before he could reply, a cart near them erupted into flames.

Off to the side, a woman’s voice screamed. The scream seemed to set off the crowd because a few moments later, there were dozens of cries of alarm from the north, west, and east. Resembling a bunch of herd animals, the civilians in the crowd panicked and stampeded.

An attack. Related to Kumo. Of course. But is the target me or someone else?

Minato reacted. The crowd scattered around them, but Minato had already lunged forward and dragged Naruto and Sasuke to the ground by their collars. Hoping that Naruto had dragged Hinata after them, Minato darted forward until they were crawling under the picnic table used in the earlier contest.

It was hot and all other sound was diluted by the screams and cries from the adults outside the tent. The panicked breathing of all four of them—Hinata had made it—flooded their little enclosed

space.

"What's happening?" Naruto sounded panicked, but Minato could barely hear him.

"Where's Itachi?" Sasuke whispered right in his ear.

"They are..." Minato concentrated—

And felt nothing. No chakra signatures. Nothing. *What.*

Kurama? Minato called, not bothering to disguise his panic.

"Minato, can you tell where they are?" Sasuke's voice again. He could even feel his breath on his ear.

Kurama!

Poison. You're going to pass out. The dose was…extreme.

Kurama actually sounded strained. The information was precise, stating only what was necessary. Without saying so, Kurama was suggesting that he *could not* speak. And that itself suggested… What exactly did it suggest?

Oh, Kami.

"I—" Minato lifted a hand and was alarmed when he realized his vision was already doubling.

"Minato?" Naruto? Was that Naruto?

Suddenly, there were alarmed voices and another person was with them. It felt like…Itachi? Shisui? Minato was not sure and he couldn't see!

His shoulder felt warmer. Someone was touching him. No, someone had grabbed him and was tugging him somewhere. The next thing he knew, Minato was staring up at the stars and a bunch of blurry faces were hovering around his face.

"Minato?" Whoever that was, they sounded worried.

"Poisoned juice?" Minato stammered. "I need…to get…"

Minato grimaced in frustration as his thoughts literally refused to organize themselves. He needed to focus!

Kurama, I can't pass out! They're in trouble!

Too bad. Keeping us alive is my priority. They're on their own.

Kurama…what if…?

Let go. There is nothing you can do for them. Now shut up and let me concentrate!

"Minato!"

Cool hands were touching his forehead, but Minato could not determine their size or texture.

There were some words exchanged and a cool hand slipped into his own and squeezed so hard that Minato wanted to pull away from the pressure. And—

Something wet was falling on his face, but he couldn't…he couldn't…

"C'mon, Minato! You have to be okay! Please, please be okay!"

That was Naruto. Minato was certain of it, but he sounded so far away.

Minato tried to sit up. He tried to struggle away from the arms pulling at him. He failed.

Minato sagged backward and felt his eyes fall closed.

Hinata…Sasuke…Naruto…I'm sorry. I thought I could prepare for everything, but I was wrong. I'm so sorry.

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People were screaming. There was smoke everywhere and fire had already burned down the tent they were closest to. Naruto had seen Minato's brother—that crazy hair was pretty distinct—but some guy had attacked him before Naruto could call out to him. There was no sign of Kaa-san or Shisui.

At least Itachi had found them. Itachi had crawled under the table, picked up Minato, and led them all to the far end of the
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table and into the open air again. They had taken refuge behind a makeshift food prep area that had bits of chopped vegetables and meat skewers still roasting over the unmanned grills.

Naruto swallowed hard and rubbed his eyes when they started to sting. The fire had moved to another tent nearby and smoke was billowing out of it. Naruto could see masked shinobi and Uchiha clan members working together to try and stifle the flames, but they seemed to spread too quickly to be contained.

Minato was motionless. He was a grey sort of pale that made Naruto nervous. And seeing how grim Itachi looked with his Sharingan activated didn't help matters.

“We need to get out of here,” Naruto said, before breaking into a coughing fit when a cloud of smoke hit him right in the face.

“We need to take him to a hospital.” Sasuke sounded scared and that frightened Naruto more than he was comfortable admitting.

“We need to find Tsunade-sama!” Hinata coughed hoarsely. Naruto instantly put a supporting arm around her.

“We need to go.”

Itachi lifted Minato’s limp form into his arms. His head lolled sluggishly to the side.

“Everyone, follow me. Quickly.”

They exited cautiously. Food was abandoned everywhere alongside chopsticks and dripping platters. Naruto grabbed Hinata’s sweaty hand, made sure Sasuke was following him, and followed Itachi’s path through the destroyed festival grounds. Stuffed prizes had been massacred by trampling feet and overturned carts every few feet prevented an easy exit from the area. Scores of people continued to try and escape the spreading fires that were consuming the tents.

Despite the chaos, Naruto was continually impressed as Itachi navigated the area with ease, finally leading them into a grassy area just a few paces shy of a side street leading back into Konoha proper. Most of those paths were clogged with singed people, the majority of which required medical attention. Itachi seemed to recognize this since he steered them toward a quiet alleyway that led away from the crowds and hopefully toward home. The side street was one that was dimly lit, but he recognized the sign from one of the

windows that was just a couple blocks from home.

When he stopped behind the abruptly still Itachi, Hinata literally climbed the back of his shins, but Naruto did not notice. He was too busy scrambling as Itachi suddenly whipped around and all but dropped Minato on top of him. Sasuke and Hinata were both grabbing hold of Minato and Naruto felt another spike of fear at just how still his body seemed.

A sharp clang struck his ears. Naruto hurled himself over Hinata's shaking body and fearfully looked up.

There was a large-nosed man with a wicked scar running over his jaw holding a sword. A sword that was blocked by Itachi-nii and a puny little kunai.

Naruto swallowed hard and desperately tried not to be afraid.

It did not seem that his efforts were successful, though; he felt like crying. And a painful amount of shame radiated throughout his being because of this.

How could he ever be a shinobi if he was scared all the time?

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When the first flames engulfed a festival stand, Kakashi descended from his perch prepared to wreak havoc. With Obito's gift, Kakashi scanned the surrounding area for signs of trouble.

Kakashi made a move to head in the direction he had last seen Minato, but he was waylaid by a civilian woman shrieking with the back of her dress and hair on fire. A quick suiton jutsu dealt with the flame, leaving only a vague scent of charred flesh and the frightened sobbing of the woman. Kakashi's instincts screamed at him to go find Minato, but duty won out and he reluctantly dragged the hobbling woman toward an Aburame wearing a police uniform and shoved her at the man.

A hurried explanation later and Kakashi sprinted back to the wrecked tables.

Years of combat had him deflecting the kunai aimed for his
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head. Kakashi moved. Twisting in midair, he summoned a tingling crackle of lightning and automatically shaped his chakra into a blade.

Kakashi turned. He felt the hum of electricity fade.

Ebisu stood across from him with absolutely no emotion. It was a rather startling contrast to an individual whose moods and facial expressions seemed to be in a constant state of flux.

“Ebisu?”

A lesser shinobi might not have successfully evaded the barrage of shuriken Ebisu sent in his direction. Hatake Kakashi was not a lesser shinobi. Kakashi performed a kawarimi with a slat of wood, charged his body with chakra, and smashed his fist into Ebisu’s head.

Unfortunately, Ebisu vanished in a poof of smoke and reappeared a dozen paces away. The tokubetsu jounin turned in the direction the crowd was moving and—shit!

Kakashi’s kawarimi popped as Ebisu’s fingers formed the tiger seal.

Kakashi slammed his hands down.

“Doton: Mud Wall!”

The ground trembled. Kakashi vaulted his wall and catapulted over the fireball. To his left and right, an ANBU team had erected two additional walls to block off a retreat.

“Taichou!” the bear masked ANBU called tentatively.

Kakashi did not waste time denying the title when that sort of authority would allow him to potentially salvage this situation. A capture mission was better than outright execution.

“Dynamic Entry!”

A flash of green and Kakashi felt a bit of relief surge through him. Say what you would about that man, he had impeccable timing.

“Secure the citizens of Konoha and search for intruders. Whoever is behind this can’t have gone far,” Kakashi shouted.

“On it.”

The ANBU teams' presence vanished.

Kakashi wasted no time and dropped down, shoulder to shoulder with his oldest friend. Ebisu had pulled two kunai and his muscles were bunching up as he took an offensive stance.

“Ebisu would not do this willingly.”

Kakashi nodded, altered his grip on his kunai slightly, and waited for Ebisu to move.

“Kakashi, I know it’s a lot to ask, but—”

“Come on, Gai.” Kakashi stepped forward, Sharingan whirling as Ebisu charged at them. “You and I have a perfect track record working together. We’re not about to spoil it now. Let’s go!”

“Yosh, rival! Let us go!”

Minato…stay safe. I’m coming as quickly as I can.

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Shisui dropped another two frightened looking kids into the arms of very green genin who were holding their kunai and fearfully watching two of Konoha’s elite try to subdue one of their own.

Time is a precious commodity, especially when a single moment can mean the difference between saving lives and the death of a comrade. Pulling his tanto, he heard the sharp intake of breaths behind him and found himself growing frustrated when he saw the genin were still rooted to the spot instead of performing their duties.

“Hey.” The purple-haired girl near him jumped a foot and her teammates looked resolved but terrified with their petrified eyes. “Get those kids to safety. If you can, take them to the hospital.”

“But Uchiha-san,” one of the boys mustered the courage to say, “what should we do after that?”

“Find your jounin-sensei.”

Shisui vanished in a blur, reappeared on a containment wall that ANBU had put up, and surveyed the surrounding area. The
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explosive tags appeared to have been rigged to explode every twenty meters. The explosions themselves peppered the crowd with shrapnel and sowed chaos in a large area.

The Hyuuga were assisting the joint Aburame-Uchiha division in retrieving trapped citizens they could see with their Byakugan. All able-bodied shinobi in the area were busy trying to rescue comrades and put out the fires. Shisui had even witnessed Hiashi working closely with Fugaku and Shibi during a tricky rescue operation.

At least Itachi was with the kids. That had to be worth something.

Now, Shisui allowed his Sharingan to do the work for him and looked for a potential instigator. Ebisu's fighting was ridiculously fast, but stilted. Every motion the tokubetsu jounin made was infused with his chakra. His speed was remarkable, but the micro-motions in the muscles and jerky movements all pointed to something out of place.

There! The fabric of Ebisu's shirt was almost...torn? Shisui's Sharingan zeroed onto the tokubetsu jounin's chest and saw it. A seal.

Holy fuck, that had to be it. A mind-control seal. And hot damn! How many people alive could actually *make* those things?

"Hatake!" Shisui called.

Kakashi cocked his head to the side, but never took his eyes off their rogue comrade.

"Hold him off. I know who I'm looking for!"

Shisui had seen Ebisu behaving like the annoying prat he was just outside the juice bar. So that woman! She had to be the connection!

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Splitting his chakra sucked, but Shisui knew playing it safe in these circumstances was better than the alternative. Travelling so quickly as to barely be considered a blur, Shisui and his clone reappeared outside the makeshift stand. Shisui waited for his clone to enter and signal the all-clear before he followed. A quick sweep of the interior turned up nothing of note except shattered sunglasses and

sliced restraints.

No woman, though.

Shisui returned to the roof, spying Mikoto blazing a path in a direction that was going to make some unlucky bastard sorry.

“I’ll head this way.” The clone was gone before Shisui approved the suggestion.

So where would Shisui go if he were infiltrating? It couldn’t be far or the controller would risk losing proximity to the target, so… where?

Shisui veered off until he reached the only untouched area in the civilian part of the festival. There was some damage to the structures, but the police force appeared to be doing an admirable job of leading the people to safety.

Movement made sense, so…Shisui needed to look for someone who was not evacuating.

If it was not for his Sharingan, Shisui probably would have missed the woman crouched behind a pair of tents that had yet to be devoured by the fire. The genjutsu cloaking her was subtle, but complex enough to explain why the ANBU had missed her. Whoever this woman was, she was damn good.

Too bad for her, Shisui was no slouch.

The shunshin was a beautiful jutsu and no one had put time into mastering it the way Shisui had. And it was unlikely that anyone without a Sharingan could have trained their bodies to keep up with their eyes.

The woman surprised him again. She deflected with her kunai, only a slight break in expression suggesting she was nervous.

“Surrender. I’m taking you into custody,” Shisui called out harshly. Forming the seals for a powerful yin-release, Shisui layered an A-rank illusionary paralysis technique over his opponent

“That isn’t going to work on me.” She gently tapped her pale wrist where a permanent seal was inscribed. “No ordinary genjutsu has a chance of affecting me.”

Which was…a bummer, really, since Shisui was rather exceptional with illusionary techniques.

The woman gracefully repelled his strike and lashed out with a second kunai. Shisui dodged the abdominal thrust. Then he flipped backward as the predictive element of his Sharingan saved him from a score of senbon flying from the kunoichi's mouth.

"You're pretty good for a child." She smiled. "But this is over."

The woman twisted away and back, her hands forming seals at a rate that made him green with envy.

"Hyōton: Icy Devastation!"

Crap.

The air itself grew cold and literal shards of ice formed from the air around him, while the surface of the tents and ground grew large spikes of solid ice.

Seriously, a freaking Yuki? How was his luck always so lousy!

Shisui would have been skewered if his speed was not what it was.

"Katon: Dragon's Flame!" Shisui's fire branched from his mouth to the left, right, and straight ahead to smash into the icy spears, melting parts of it.

The steam cleared, revealing only emptiness.

"Crap, she's running!"

Shisui launched himself into the air and reappeared in front of his fleeing target. She looked frustrated and angrily swung a blade —a fricking ice sword—right at his head.

Shisui blocked, but it was the principal of the thing that really bothered him.

"Come quietly and I'll speak on your behalf."

"No deal." She shook her head, almost derisively, before a barrage of senbon—again, entirely formed from ice—flew toward him.

Cursing viciously, Shisui was forced to dodge lest he be hit.

This wasn't working. He was faster than her, but Shisui could not risk being hit by her either. Shisui had never fought a sealmaster before since they were a dying breed, but if this woman laid a hand on him, it was entirely possible she could remove him from the field. Still, Shisui knew he had to do something drastic to bring this little match to an end.

"Give up," he taunted.

They danced around each other. Shisui threw a fireball into her face that forced her to create an icy sphere around herself for protection.

Overwhelming her with the shunshin was still his best option, but Shisui did not have the chakra for another shadow clone, meaning this match may come down to ninjutsu. Shisui may be an ace with Katon techniques, but her Hyōton was resilient against B-rank Katon techniques. But if he couldn't win in a ninjutsu altercation then he would—yeah, she wouldn't know what hit her.

Shisui raced forward in a blur of speed.

"You're underestimating me!"

Ice rose up to grab his ankles. Shisui performed a quick replacement with a bit of wood and somersaulted over a literal maw of ice that rose from the ground like a frozen boogie monster.

Timing his chakra right, he left an ordinary Bunshin behind to "attack" the kunoichi. Pumping all the chakra he could spare into his legs, Shisui zipped faster than the ordinary eye could follow and faster than any Sharingan save Itachi's could perceive.

It worked for two seconds. The kunoichi lunged toward his perfect Bunshin, hesitated, and *realized.* She lifted her hands. Shisui could see her chakra gathering—and too late.

Shisui cracked his enemy's skull with the butt of his blade and caught her as she collapsed in a heap.

Breathing hard, he stared at his unconscious, devastatingly beautiful captive and whooped for joy!

"Take that, losers!" Shisui laughed hard as he threw the

passed-out woman over his shoulder gamely. “I told you that the Bunshin jutsu wouldn’t be a waste of time! Can’t wait to rub it in Itachi’s face!”

Shisui took a breath and started racing toward the nearest T&I holding facility he was aware of, never noticing the attention of a nearby ANBU squad as they studied him.

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Itachi retreated away from the horrified children, but tossed a genjutsu over them to mask their location.

The street they were in was composed of civilian housing and provided little to no cover, but Itachi landed just shy of a wooden porch.

The man with the large nose raced toward him, hands flying through a series of seals that Itachi’s Sharingan read easily as a doton technique.

Itachi launched himself to the side just in time to avoid a rock-encrusted fist that smashed the small home’s porch and entryway to rubble.

“Itachi!”

“Nii-san!”

Itachi spun and countered.

“Katon: Phoenix Sage Fire Technique!”

Half a dozen individual spheres of fire roared forward. Behind the flames, Itachi scattered another half a dozen shuriken into the concealing barrier provided by the smoke.

Not unexpectedly, the pop of a kawarimi going off sounded. But Itachi had already executed a seal-less kawarimi of his own and left a clone behind. The singed brunet stumbled out of the smoke with a shuriken lodged in his calf.

“You little brat!” The man swung at him wildly with a kunai—his efforts passing through the illusionary Bunshin. “I’m going to enjoy killing you.”
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“Not as much as *I’m* going to enjoy killing *you*!”

Itachi felt his jaw sag as his mother, still clad in festival attire, launched herself at the enemy-nin wielding nothing but a katana and her dojutsu.

The clash of steel resounded with a high *ping*. Mikoto swung with a series of vicious strikes that her opponent was struggling to keep up with. No movement was wasted. The air crackled as chakra licked along the edges of his mother’s blade and snapped the enemy’s kunai clean in half, forcing him to retreat.

“Itachi, the children. Now!” Mikoto called in a clipped, angry tone.

Itachi heeded the words, sparing a glance for his mother who continued to attack with rapid strikes that prevented her opponent from using ninjutsu while also putting him on the defensive.

“Itachi-nii, you were amazing,” Naruto panted in greeting, but did not move from where he was wrapped around a shaking Hinata.

Sasuke crouched over his friend’s body, clutching a kunai with bloodless fingers. His otouto’s attention was not for him, though; it was focused on their Kaa-san.

Itachi knelt next to the small boy, mildly surprised when his eyelids fluttered slightly.

“Minato?” Itachi leaned close to gauge a reaction. The small body shuddered; lips worked soundlessly in disorientation.

“Is he going to be okay?” Sasuke whispered urgently.

Itachi pursed his lips, unsure of what reassurance he could offer his brother.

Coming to a decision, he scooped the boy up in his arms, moved to stand, and was stopped by the shrieks of the trio around him.

Itachi jerked around. The enemy was rushing toward them, kunai raised. Mikoto intercepted him, nearly severing the man’s left arm with a swing of her sword.

Their blades clashed together again, both his mother and her opponent breathing heavily. Mikoto stepped into the enemy's guard and swung the curve of her katana into his ribcage. He staggered backward, cupping his gut before falling into a graceless heap.

Itachi's eyes narrowed as the ground shimmered slightly behind his mother.

"Kaa-san!" Naruto screamed.

Mikoto flipped around and buried her bloody sword into the body of a clone emerging from the ground. It crumbled away into dirt.

"She did it. Mikoto-sama did it." Little Hinata's words were barely audible.

"Is everyone alright?" Mikoto took a single step before she staggered, choking hard.

Itachi sucked in a breath, every instinct in him screaming as a blade emerged from his mother's chest.

Itachi felt the world around him slow. The screams around him sounded far, far away and all he could see were flecks of red as Mikoto gagged on her own blood.

"Fucking Uchiha always think your eyes are so damn better. Stupid bitch never realized that she had been fighting a clone this entire time."

Itachi's eyes darted to the side, seeing the "injured" body the enemy had left behind crumble into a tidy pile of rocks.

"And you talk too much," his mother retorted harshly.

Mikoto's hand moved faster than lightning. Less than a second later, the man fell dead—truly dead—with a kunai completely embedded in his eye socket.

In the next moment, Mikoto pitched forward.

Chapter End Notes

In the interest of full disclosure, the OC is going to go away. They are not going to have a major role. I just felt that their perspective was useful in getting to know your opponent and providing the reader with some perspective for upcoming events. Otherwise, I hope you didn't hate her very existence!

Anyway, TBC!

Love you all!

Chapter 13: With Eyes Wide Open

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fū swatted at a persistent fly buzzing around her neck.

“Leave me alone,” she grumbled.

Fū was exhausted. Every step was plagued by increasingly aggressive insects and it had been three days—no, that was not quite right. It had to have been longer than that. Fū was sure that the moon—or the misshapen white blob—shrunk or at least changed shape with each passing night.

But that could be the exhaustion talking. After all, Fū was pretty sure she had hallucinated the last "sighting" of Taki searchers since jounin were not deterred by the growling of girls like her.

The forest she was currently traipsing through was packed with incredibly dense foliage. At the edge of a stream that Fū had literally stumbled into, she sank to her knees, cupped her dirty hands together beneath the water, and greedily drank. After several more mouthfuls, Fū found herself shocked by her reflection’s appearance. The orderly strands of seafoam green looked like a dirty broom; a strand of sticky spider web trailed down her cheek, while bits of grass and debris poked out of her hair from all angles. Her nose already suggested her clothing smelled uncomfortably ripe and the grit under her fingernails was a sore reminder of how grimy she had become since running away.

“I don’t think I can keep going,” Fū mumbled glumly while picking at a scab on her knee from a fall earlier…sometime. “I’m out of food, lost, and with my luck I’m going to run into a bear that’s hungrier than I am tired.”

Out of vague curiosity, she wiggled her toes in her saturated sandals and hummed as they squelched noisily. Almost in a lull, Fū jerked slightly as her bijuu’s voice tickled the far side of her internal senses.

I’m sorry I can’t help more. Your body can only utilize so much of my chakra at a time before you require a respite. And while I could funnel more chakra to you at this time, I dare not do so

unless a retrieval team catches up to us.

Fū unconsciously straightened and tugged on the hem of her tattered tunic.

"You got me out of there." Fū felt a pressing need to remind the voice inside her of that fact. And another sudden, inexplicable yearning to wash or—something. "I don't know what I would have done without you. Probably nothing."

You're stronger than you realize. I've watched you all this time, you know.

The image of the massive insect observing her made Fū feel a surge of gratitude.

"But...but—"

Fū staggered to her feet and swayed for a second.

"You took me flying! Even if it was only for a few minutes, I had wings! And…I felt your chakra helping me run faster. I've never moved so fast. Not even when I train my hardest. It was incredible, you know. It reminded me of one of my favourite books."

Why don't you tell me about it?

Fū blinked through her internal fog and struggled to make sense of the request.

"It was kind of a weird story, actually." Fū felt a modicum of guilt for not being more supportive. "Nothing special. Just a kid's story."

Fū, do you value your story less because it was intended for hatchlings? Do not concern yourself with feeling embarrassed over a story. And don't be ashamed of who you are and what you enjoy.

If she was not already exhausted, she might have wept from how powerful those kind words made her feel. And how they did not make her feel as small and helpless as everyone else tried to make her. A lot of adults cared about the status of their jinchuuriki, but no one had cared about Fū in a long time. Not even Fū's family wanted her around after she became the host for the Nanabi—*No*, she reminded herself stiffly. *Choumei.*

No one ever asked Fū about her interests or cared enough to help her run away. No one except—Choumei. Lucky Seven Choumei was what he called himself? Or was her bijuu a her?

Choumei cared. The least she could do was keep going. The least she could do was return the favour.

Fū talked. The words poured out like a dam breaking; she told Choumei about the child's story she liked; about a book about wood carving that she really didn't understand, but had read because she found it in a trash bin; and the adventure stories she liked to pretend she was part of.

Throughout it all, Choumei spoke rarely, but when he did, it was warm and lacked the callous judgment she was half-expecting to come her way.

It never did.

So caught up in her rambling, she never saw the group standing in a clearing watching her approach until she had ploughed right into the side of one of them.

"Oof!" Fū grunted, bounced off, and jerked backward in horror.

Shinobi. Not Taki shinobi. A man with dark eyes and scar tissue covering part of his face. Another man with shoulder-length brown hair wearing a bandana and a smile. A girl or a woman? Scowling, annoyed, and spattered with blood. And a man with sunglasses, black hair, and…

Fū? Do we need to run?

"Stay back!" She backpedalled.

"Twitchy little brat." The woman spat a bit of red onto the ground, crimson stains shining garishly against the white of her teeth.

Was she going to be killed here and now? Gutted like a poor fish?

"Give the kid a break." The bandana-wearing man sighed and took a step toward her with his hands extended.

"Shiranui?" The one with sunglasses started.

“Let me handle this.”

Fū?! You’re afraid. Do we need to go?

“Kid, you look like you’re about to bolt,” Bandana Man said with a low, honey-sweet voice. “Just calm down for a minute. I promise we are not going to hurt you.”

“If you were a liar, you’d probably say the same thing,” Fū rasped while blinking furiously as her vision spotted.

“Ugh, that kid smells pretty ripe. Good luck dealing with that, Genma.” The woman snickered into her palm.

The man in front of her did not react or outwardly respond to the woman. Instead, Fū watched him fall into a lazy crouch and smile at her crookedly as he extended his hands toward her, palms up.

“You’re absolutely right. You don’t know me and you have no good reason to trust me. But I can tell you that I *want* to help you. Will you let me do that, kid?”

Bandana Man's voice was soft and his eyes were twinkling in a manner she had witnessed before, when adults looked at their children. Fondness. Kindness. Either she was being taken in by this man’s mockery of sentiment or there was a chance he was being sincere.

Fū?

I think we’re okay, she told Choumei. Then, to herself: *I hope I’m not wrong…but I’m so very tired now.*

Fū bit her lip, staring at the open hands and their beckoning fingers. Aware she must look quite the sight, she plodded a few steps toward Bandana Man, who was still smiling at her. Showing her poor luck was still at large, Fū tripped over a rock and fully expected to hit the ground.

Instead, she felt a warm body and arms around her. *Around her!* She had never expected that being held would be so warm and reassuring. Instead of panicking, Fū felt her last bit of strength fail and her eyes close.

“I like this,” she slurred, but persisted. It felt important to convey this. “No one has ever…Thank you.”

It might have been her imagination, but Fū thought the warmth became stronger and there might have been some sort of response, but she was beyond all that. Her body had cooperated long enough and now she needed rest.

Beneath the surface, Fū sensed Choumei's lingering worry and knew she should probably feel more insecure. But she just couldn't believe all that warmth had been a lie. She could not believe it.

Fū drifted to sleep.

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*"**That amount of poison would have been lethal in minutes if I hadn't been here.**"*

The bijuu's massive paws were pressed together and each of Kurama's tails were unnaturally coiled from his efforts. Minato was pacing the length of their grassy garden restlessly. Occasional words and phrases fell through the cracks of his mind: flashes and impressions of movement, flares of chakra...And here he was, helpless and incapable of raising a finger.

"But you are *here. Someone tried to kill us. That bothers me more than I'm comfortable admitting, but I need to get out there and help. How long until I can wake up?"*

*"**Don't get cocky. I've prevented the poison from taking root, but my chakra has exhausted your system. You may be capable of waking soon, but you'll be weak and in no condition to be of help to anyone unless that slug woman intervenes...Even then, you won't be able to do much for a few days.**"*

"I suppose I should have guessed. Thank you for saving our lives, Kurama."

*"**What would you do if you could wake up?**" For once, Kurama sounded thoughtful and almost introspective.*

Irrationally, it added to Minato's growing disquiet.

"What do you mean? I would be helping, of course. I could—"
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"You could use your Hiraishin? Oh, right. That jutsu is impossible to use until your body has developed and your chakra coils sync with my chakra. I guess that's out."

Minato wanted to object, but this blatant sarcasm was not something Kurama reverted to very often, so it caught him off guard. His sneering best friend continued to spew out a tirade of verbal displeasure.

"So, if the Hiraishin is off the table, why not elemental jutsu? Oh, wait, that's right! Even if you could pull off a few flashy jutsu—which you absolutely could not in your condition—but assuming you could, your affinities are completely different and your chakra manipulation and control are subpar at this time. Let's not even discuss how poison would interfere with your ability to mould chakra. Taijutsu? Certainly your kata are impressive, but they lack the strength, dexterity, or reflexes necessary to contend against anyone above or at civilian level. My chakra can only keep you alive at this juncture. And even that is proving a more trying task than I had anticipated."

It was difficult to sit and listen to his truest friend verbally eviscerate his skills. It was an even greater shame to know the bijuu was not wrong. His body was too young to be much of a threat to anyone. That did not mean he was useless; Minato had his mind and a previous lifetime's worth of knowledge at his disposal, but Kurama was right.

Minato was helpless. Helpless as he had not been since his previous childhood.

The orphanage he had lived in from birth had been overcrowded with war orphans like himself. Records were practically nonexistent, leaving Minato with no clues as to the identity of his parents or the circumstances of his existence. Konoha funded the orphanage, but in wartimes, the funds and foodstuffs became less frequent, and Minato spent most of his early days going hungry. Minato had never been resentful of his lot in life, but seeing the desolation in the eyes of the other children when another meal was skipped or replacement sandals were not available for feet that had become too large…

Minato hated it.

In those moments when he listened to children crying themselves to sleep, his heart changed.

A new dream had been born over the nights he curled up on his dingy cot with a patched blanket wrapped around himself and whichever

child needed comfort the most

While clutching those raggedy weeping children, Minato vowed he would become a shinobi that could protect all the people he cared about. Someone who could put an end to conflicts and keep his people safe. Keep children from weeping in their beds as the body count rose and entire families were erased from existence.

Minato hated helplessness for that reason. And now things had come full circle.

And Kurama was right: there was nothing Minato could do.

"I don't like being helpless, Kurama."

"Now you know how I felt when Madara controlled me for the first time."

Kurama sounded so bitter, so angry, that Minato abandoned his pacing and rushed toward his friend. Instantly, Minato grabbed a hunk of hair and began scaling Kurama's fur; his weight was negligible and any tugging would feel like the skittering of an insect.

"You know I didn't mean it like that, Kurama." Minato gasped in exertion as he pulled himself level with Kurama's knee joint.

"And you know I didn't, either." *The malevolence receded and a massive paw snatched him off his perch. Minato smiled unconcernedly as Kurama held him aloft so that they were eye to eye, red to red.*

"This just reminds me of the day that Uzumaki bitch dragged me down and pinned me deep within her. I was helpless to stop Madara and I was just as helpless to stop the Shodai's wife from imprisoning me."

There had been a question on the tip of his tongue for over a decade now. For a long time, Minato had been too nervous to ask, but now seemed appropriate.

"Is it because of Mito that you hated Kushina so much?"

Minato knew it was a risk, but he also knew that no matter what his friend's answer was, he would not abandon Kurama.

"I swore I would never lie to you or cater to your

emotions."

This was both Kurama's best and worst feature as a friend. But having someone to count on to always be honest was a rare prize indeed, in the world they lived in.

"And I vowed the same to you."

"Until you and I reconciled our differences, a jinchuuriki was nothing more and nothing less than a cell of solitary confinement, with the only occasional company being that of my jailer."

There was considerable resentment attached to Kurama's voice. Minato wrapped his arms around as much of Kurama as he could. It reminded him of the small children that he embraced in the orphanage under heavy blankets.

"In many ways, I was fortunate that I was left alone. Some of my siblings have been far less lucky in their prisons."

There was a long pause. The massive bijuu stretched languidly.

"I hated what your lovely wife represented more than I hated her."

Minato swallowed, but did not look away. Disagreement or not, Kurama was his friend and these were his feelings. Not unjustifiable from his perspective.

"A master of fuinjutsu is a master in creating prisons. Certainly, one could argue that there are a thousand more uses that are readily available in day-to-day life, but a student of seals inevitably is seeking greater power. And what greater power is there than leashing a power that does not belong to you and using it for yourself?"

For most of his life, Minato had been in control of his own destiny. Even when he had made the contract with the Shinigami, he had been in control. It was not the first time that he hated himself for condemning his friend to a lifetime sealed away. And this new life...Kurama had come along, but no one had asked him.

Releasing Kurama was out of the question until Madara had been laid to rest for good, but that did not mean it could never happen. Technically, Minato had already been blessed with a full life; this, here,

was just extra time that a dead man did not deserve.

When the fighting was done, Minato could do the right thing this time. The cost of his own life to break the chains instead of creating them was worth it—Kurama was worth it.

"Kurama, you're my best friend and I love you." Minato struggled a bit as the fist tightened around his midsection and he smiled crookedly at the intense scrutiny he was facing. "When this is all over, I promise that I'll free you. You deserve better than this cage."

"No."

Minato had expected a protest, but not a flat-out rejection and the sudden rush of toxic, raging chakra that made him almost nervous as his friend's tails lashed out to bulldoze a few dozen fake trees.

"Kurama, assuming we both survive this, I'm going to let you go. You deserve better than this!"

"If we survive Madara, I'm staying with you. You and I will live out this new mortal existence together. I will prevent you from giving your jutsu stupid names and stop you from getting yourself killed. Whenever and however you meet your end, I will be there with you. And when you breathe your last, my chakra will disperse and though it may take a century, I will have my freedom at that time."

"You really want to stay?" he asked stupidly.

They were friends. In fact, Kurama was easily the friend that knew him better than any other. And while Minato had more friends than he knew what to do with, those he truly loved were precious few in number.

But when you love someone, the best gift of all is the willingness to set them free. But what happened when the bijuu you loved wanted to stay in jail?

"You're not a jailor, Minato," Kurama rumbled. ***"Even an idiot like you should realize that."***

"After all these years together, you still manage to surprise me with how sweet you are."

The fist tightened and Minato flinched again.

*"**No infecting me with your human sentimentality.**"*

Minato laughed at that.

"I make no promises, old friend."

Minato sank his fingers into Kurama's fur and channelled all his loving thoughts toward his furry comrade.

Maybe the promises he made in the dark were not lost forever. Minato could still follow that path and perhaps he could succeed now that he knew what failure looked like.

*"**You need to go.**"*

"What's wrong?" Minato stirred uneasily. "I thought you said it was a bad idea."

*"**I can sense my yang chakra becoming active, which means Naruto needs you. If you can touch him, we should be able to absorb that chakra.**"*

"Give me a boost!" Minato called, mentally preparing himself to wake up in a worst-case scenario.

*"**Minato, you won't regain consciousness for long. Make the most of it.**"*

"I understand." Minato gritted his teeth as Kurama's corrosive chakra crowded his small body. "Thank you."

*"**What are friends for? Go, Minato.**"*

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"Take it out!"

"I can't. Doing so would cause you to bleed out faster."

"*Kaa-san!*"

"Naruto, s'alright. I'll be fine."

"Hinata."

"Y-yes?"
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“Kaa-san!”

“Hinata, hold him as tight as you can. If Naruto grabs her, he may accidently make her worse.”

Sasuke’s ears began to ring, distorting the voices and disrupting his train of thought.

Everything was wrong. Nothing was how it was supposed to be.

Sasuke turned his head to the right.

Hinata had streams of tears running down her cheeks. The girl had her arms wrapped around a hysterical blond boy that was fighting her tooth and nail to escape. Naruto’s face was screwed up, and the odd whisker marks on his cheeks seemed darker. Though Sasuke could no longer hear him, he knew he had to be calling out for their Kaa-san.

Perhaps it was just Sasuke’s imagination—a trick of the light or something of that nature—but he could have sworn he saw flecks of red peppering Naruto’s naturally blue irises.

Sasuke shook his head and grinded his teeth: the ringing was just getting louder.

He looked down.

Minato was blinking up at him owlishly. His friend’s pallor reminded Sasuke of the time Itachi was in the hospital for two weeks after a mission gone wrong. Minato was hurt—had been poisoned?

Everything was wrong. The ringing was getting even louder.

Almost in slow motion, Sasuke watched his friend’s drowsiness transform into alarm. Minato’s eyes popped, his mouth started moving, and he rolled over to look to where Hinata had Naruto pinned down.

Sasuke turned his head to the left.

Itachi was statue-still with one of Kaa-san’s arms slung over his shoulders. Mikoto’s bloody mouth was opening and closing like a fish's and her eyes had begun to almost roll, while the tip of a blade

was plainly visible nestled just under her bust. Sasuke looked away from the knife and felt his breathing stall a bit. Sasuke could see his brother's lips moving with his Sharingan focused elsewhere.

What was he looking at? Couldn't Itachi see that Kaa-san was badly hurt? Whenever he needed something, Sasuke always trusted his nii-san to handle things. But now Kaa-san was hurt, really hurt, and Itachi should be doing *something. Anything!*

Sasuke mumbled something that was meant to be his mother's name and bit his lip hard. Kaa-san's chest was moving fast like she had been running and Sasuke could almost count the individual beads of perspiration dotting her forehead. In fact, Sasuke watched two tiny droplets of blood drip from his mother's mouth and it seemed to him that they hung suspended in the air. But that was not quite accurate, either; Sasuke watched the blood descend and tracked their journey as the droplets changed forms, elongated, and—

Sasuke felt Minato moving—he knew his friend should definitely *not* be up, but he made no move to grab the other boy as he bumped into his side.

Sasuke's ears roared. His eyes stung. His body felt locked in place by an invisible force.

A shadow detached itself from the roof and was swallowed by the darkness they were sitting in. A person emerged. Someone that was no taller than Kaa-san, but definitely older than Itachi.

The shadow moved closer. Closer to Itachi. Closer to Kaa-san. Closer to all of them.

But nobody saw!

Sasuke swallowed. His eyes flickered to where Itachi *did not* see. Itachi's Sharingan was spinning and he was still looking toward Naruto and—

Kaa-san was hurt. She was maybe not going to be alright. Sasuke was not fine with that. Nothing about this was fine. And if Itachi let her fall…she would be hurt more. Possibly killed.

But there was a shadow that was not a shadow right behind them! Someone had to do something. Minato was hurt, and no one had seen. It was up to him now.

Sasuke scurried for a kunai that had fallen a mere couple of paces away. It had not lodged into any surface so retrieving it was a simple matter.

He picked it up. He turned. The shadow was nearly on top of Kaa-san and Itachi. Both of them were distracted by something.

Sasuke's eyes burned. The ringing in his ears became almost deafening. He raised the kunai.

The shadow turned. The lips did not move. The eyes were blank and there was no frown. No smile. Nothing was there.

Sasuke plunged the kunai into the gut of the shadow, stumbled, and fell forward as the blade sank into the shadow's flesh like it was butter. Sasuke's knees hurt from where they scraped rock, but Sasuke pushed himself up and—froze.

A woman stared at him with blood dribbling down a tanned cheek. Scarred hands cupped the kunai wound, but the woman's gaze held him in place. She stared at Sasuke without the slightest bit of accusation or anything. Sasuke's eyes roamed from the unfamiliar hitai-ate to the absolutely blank face and felt his ears roar.

Why are you looking at me like this? Why are you? Why?!

This expression was familiar and didn't make sense. The woman he had just stabbed was looking around like two-year old Uchiha Misako did. Like she was trying to understand something. Like there were no thoughts or feelings that could touch her.

Her body shuddered and went still. Her eyes were still looking at him, without blame or anger.

Sasuke backed away from the corpse blankly, staring wide-eyed, and felt himself scream.

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"Kakashi, are we close?"

He nodded shortly at the singed Sannin.

Kakashi had been handing over an unconscious Ebisu into the care of Gai and a T&I team with the intention of tracking down
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Minato when Tsunade had appeared looking a little worse for wear and covered head to sandal in soot. Needless to say, Tsunade was of a similar mind and the duo had tracked—well, Kakashi had tracked while Tsunade threatened—their precious person.

"They're just up here."

When he had scented blood in the air, Kakashi had thought himself prepared for a terrible outcome. After all, Kakashi's life was a parade of them. Starting with his mother's death and ending with his failure to properly look after his sensei's living legacy. Kakashi knew he would always carry a piece of that self-loathing, that he would never fully rid himself of it.

A scream tore through the silence from just ahead, spurring the pair forward in a final burst of speed.

"There!" Tsunade shouted.

Kakashi vaulted down from the rooftop with Tsunade on his heels and felt his heart stutter in his chest. The Sannin sucked in a shocked breath behind him.

Uchiha Sasuke was nearest, standing over the body of a woman with a newborn Sharingan in his eyes and stark terror on his face. The dead woman at his feet wore the hitai-ate of Kumo and a strangely serene expression for a dead shinobi. Beyond that, Uchiha Itachi's horrified gaze was trained on his brother, but was prevented from moving since he was holding Mikoto upright—the handle of a blade sticking out the Uchiha matriarch's back.

It seemed they had arrived just in time to witness something else of peculiar interest. So much so that the hair on the back of Kakashi's neck was raised in alarm. Uzumaki Naruto's eyes were a furious red for all of two seconds, but bled back to blue just as Minato grabbed the boy's palms. It happened so fast that Kakashi was not exactly sure *what* he was seeing, but to his Sharingan, it looked as if Minato had absorbed Naruto's excess bijuu chakra. After that, Minato lurched and fell forward only to be caught by Tsunade, whose hand was glowing green even as she breathed in ragged, harsh breaths.

Kakashi wanted to go to Minato immediately, but he was already dropping down to make sure the Kumo-nin and the intruder were actually dead. Thank Kami for ANBU training to keep his panic at bay.

As he confirmed the two shinobi were dead, Kakashi spared a look for a blood-spattered Sasuke and found himself surprised by a sudden lurch of sympathy. Kakashi had been just about Sasuke's age when he found his father dead in their home.

It was not the same at all. Not really. Still, Kakashi was surprisingly sorry for this traumatized boy. But trauma victims and little brothers had to wait for later. Those close to death took priority.

Forcing himself not to check on Minato, Kakashi instead placed himself next to Mikoto and knelt behind her for a better look at the injury. Performing a quick seal, he wordlessly created a Kage-bunshin that instantly moved to take over the job of managing Mikoto's position.

"Sasuke."

The name was barely a whisper, but Kakashi picked it up with little trouble thanks to his keen sense of hearing.

"My Bunshin and I have this, Itachi. Go."

Itachi looked shaken but nodded once and then was instantly at Sasuke's side, enveloping the younger boy in a heartfelt embrace.

ANBU training required first aid and Kakashi was not squeamish, so he ran a finger over the entry would and leaned in to get a better whiff of the area.

"It's poisoned!" Kakashi's nose had never failed him and he trusted it now.

Reacting quickly, he ripped the blade out of the woman's back, ignoring the way she cried out as he guided her down. Instantly, he placed his palms over her abdomen and pressed down hard while the Bunshin raced away to summon additional help.

"Kaa-san!"

Naruto's panicked cries hit another part of Kakashi. Naruto had already lost Kushina, he did not need to lose another mother. Not so soon. Not ever.

"Tsunade, you're needed over here. Now!"

It took less than a second to register the fact that Tsunade had not reacted to his demand and that her body was purposefully angled away, face averted.

"Tsunade! Mikoto needs medical attention *now*!"

Mikoto gasped softly, the woman's undeniably beautiful face wracked by pain as her mouth twisted and her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides.

"Kaa-san!"

Naruto had finally escaped the Hyuuga girl's grasp and was rocking back and forth on his heels, barely an inch from Mikoto's face. A small piece of him loathed Obito's gift because he did not think he would ever be able to erase the image of a dying woman smiling so tenderly at Naruto as her bloody palm lifted to stroke his cheek. Somewhere behind him, Kakashi heard the smallest Uchiha's pitiful weeping and felt his own stomach roll.

"It's gonna be okay, Naruto. S'alright."

Kakashi's teeth clenched at the honest acceptance in Mikoto's voice. This was *not* alright.

"Tsunade!" Kakashi's furious refusal to lose another person kicked in. "*Now!*"

"I can't!" The terrified reply honestly derailed his anger for a second. "Shizune should be here soon! I can't help her!"

"What?" His incredulous reply was one half rage, one half desperation. "What the hell are you on about?"

"If I look at her, I won't be able to…I can't help her, Kakashi!"

What the hell are you talking about? That doesn't make any damn sense! What the hell? What—wait.

Suddenly, the answer hit him right in the chest. A topic Kakashi overheard Kushina and his sensei discussing shortly before their deaths. An exchange that Jiraiya caused. Something about—something about—*blood.*

Senju Tsunade, greatest living medical shinobi, was afraid

of blood.

Kakashi looked down and felt his heart sink again as sticky redness oozed from the wound his hands were desperately covering.

“Tsunade, Mikoto is going to die if you don’t get over here. I understand that there is an issue with the blood, but you have to ignore it and help. Please!”

His sensei’s son stirred at that. Naruto turned, weaseled out of Hinata’s grasp, and attached himself to Tsunade. To Kakashi’s considerable alarm, Tsunade hardly seemed to feel Naruto’s fists beating her back and shoulders.

The body beneath his hands convulsed almost gently and Kakashi felt his heartrate skyrocket as Mikoto’s eyelids shuttered. If the poison did not kill her, blood loss certainly would. She needed treatment and she needed it fast.

“Help my mother, goddammit!” Naruto’s tiny fist battered at Tsunade’s nose, finally eliciting a reaction.

“Knock it off!” The words themselves were visceral and enveloped with fright. “I can’t help her! Kami, I would if I could, but I can’t. The smell of it alone is almost more than I can bear! She’ll have to wait! I can’t help her. I just…I can’t help her!”

“You have to!” The cry came from behind them and was immediately smothered by an overbearing older sibling who shushed the youngest Uchiha with muffled words.

“Please, Tsunade-sama, please!” Hinata’s small voice joined the litany of pleas. “I already lost my Kaa-san…don’t let my friends down. Please.”

“And what do you have to be afraid of, anyway!” Naruto screamed. “Minato’s alive! He’s alive, goddammit! But my Kaa-san is going to die if you don’t do something. If it was Minato, would you just let him die too?!”

Kakashi squeezed his Sharingan shut, unwilling to memorize another moment of horror so devastating.

“Oba-san.”

Kakashi jerked upright at that familiar voice, laced with

exhaustion.

"Minato, just stay still, I'm trying to—"

"Oba-san."

As if by magic, Tsunade quieted and Kakashi found it suddenly easier to breathe.

"If Mikoto had not intervened, I may have never seen you again. She was brave for our sakes. You have to be brave now for more than just yourself. Please try."

"Please!" Naruto's plea was earnest and trembling as his energy seemed to vanish.

"Please." Hinata bowed her head, continuing to weep while fisting her hand in the back of Naruto's shirt.

The pair behind him was silent save for the occasional sob escaping Sasuke's throat.

In the next moment, Kakashi got a glimpse of Minato's drawn face before Tsunade was barrelling into his line of sight, breathing shakily, sweat breaking out along her forehead, her exposed teeth embedded in her bottom lip.

"Move!"

Kakashi snapped backward into a crouch, unsure what he should do about the Sannin who looked ready to upchuck given the smallest opportunity. Despite her apparent unease, Tsunade's hands were glowing a steady green and Kakashi could have sworn he saw snaking lines of inky seals shimmering in and out of existence on her face for a brief moment.

"What can I do?" Kakashi asked seriously.

In all honesty, he was prepared to acquire any supplies the woman might require or seek out any help she might need.

"Watch Minato."

The clipped request should not have surprised him, but it did.

"I can do that."

“Good,” Tsunade snapped, looking flustered and honestly afraid. “Because if he wasn’t what he is, he would be dead now.”

That knowledge hit Kakashi not unlike the blow to the chest Mikoto had suffered.

“How?”

“Just go.” Tsunade swallowed thickly as she sucked in another long breath through her mouth.

Kakashi lifted the limp boy into his arms, buried his nose into soft silvery hair, and inhaled sharply. Minato smelled weak and vulnerable, and Kakashi’s instincts instantly went to war inside him. A piece of him railed about the unacceptability of his pup being harmed while the more rational piece proposed that the situation could have been far worse, far more dangerous.

“I’m okay.”

Kakashi felt himself shake slightly and took another reassuring whiff of Minato’s stressed, but richly alive, smell.

Kakashi had not failed. Not yet.

It took Kakashi a few moments to register the sudden emergence of half a dozen individuals. Shizune passed him by to drop down beside Tsunade, while the less-pompous Fugaku’s voice was demanding details.

“Kaa-san?” Poor little Naruto.

Kakashi was not a spiritual individual, but he found himself praying nevertheless.

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It was three in the morning and Hiruzen had not made it to bed yet. And considering how last night had played out, it seemed Hiruzen had a few more sleepless nights in his future.

Hiruzen’s fingers itched to take hold of his bo-staff and swing it at something. Not just to be destructive, but also because combat was another way of reasserting control over a situation. And
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the situation at present made the Hokage desperately aware that his control was not as complete as he may have hoped.

A dozen factors had been accounted for, but Hiruzen's experience told him another story. A's visit was the perfect opportunity for Kumo or any other nation to start something. This had been expected, but the details themselves felt false. In any event, he needed to buy a few more minutes to think.

Rubbing his eyes, Hiruzen looked up as the door swung wide and his expected arrivals poured in. Shikaku looked sharp, alert, and all too grim considering the hour and the files in the jounin commander's hands. Fugaku and Shibi came in looking tired, but ready to engage in battle if necessary. And behind them all was Jiraiya, looking deceptively casual but for a bit of hardness around his eyes that spoke volumes to Hiruzen.

Cutting right to the chase, the Hokage addressed the small group.

"Before we begin, I'd like to thank Fugaku for making time to be here. I'm aware that Mikoto was grievously injured and I know it cannot be easy to be here while she is at the hospital."

Fugaku nodded stiffly, but there was a flush to the man's cheeks that Hiruzen imagined to be a sign of pleasure.

"Shikaku, I'm very interested to hear your report, but first I would like to hear an update of our casualty list."

Shibi and Fugaku exchanged a telling look before Shibi stepped forward and offered a short, curt bow.

"Hokage-sama, only two shinobi died during tonight's altercation. A career chunin that was too inebriated to escape from the explosions and a fresh Academy graduate whose inexperience proved her undoing."

Acceptable losses, all in all.

"And civilian?"

Another look was exchanged between Shibi and Fugaku. The latter took charge with a tight nod.

"As it currently stands, seventeen civilians were killed in

the explosions. However, our forces are still searching the wreckage for remains with the assistance of Hyuuga clan members. The final tally may increase, but we don't expect to find more than a few."

"If there is any good news to report, it's that the village itself sustained no damage. While some merchants suffered losses, we believe that monetary compensation doled out by the civilian council will make any lasting problems go away."

Well, leave it to an Aburame to find a bright side to this mess.

"I've heard reports from the ANBU divisions and civilian representatives that suggest the conduct of the police force was exceptional, and they commended the police for their swift response, which saved many more lives."

"With all due respect, Hokage-sama, the attack was successful." Fugaku looked like he was swallowing a lemon. "Infiltrators successfully planted explosives at a heavily patrolled festival."

"You wouldn't have been able to do anything." Jiraiya finally opened his mouth, drawing eyes to where he was unfolding a crinkled, charred paper and placing it on the desk.

The design was intricate and had telling patterns of circular swirls the Uzumaki were known for.

"This is a custom explosive tag variant that I've never seen before today." Jiraiya's large finger traced the circular edge of a ripple. He seemed to be addressing himself more than the group. "The link here is incredibly fine. But I heard that we captured an infiltrator that used seals?"

"Uchiha Shisui engaged a suspected fuinjutsu expert from Kiri," Fugaku recited with pride. "He captured her alive and handed her over to T&I."

"Inoichi and Ibiki are working with her as we speak." Shikaku tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Though Inoichi asked me to let you know that he has not been able to utilize any clan jutsu at this time, since the woman's mind is protected by incredibly intricate sealing measures."

"That's too bad," Jiraiya groused. "Recovering potential

Uzumaki sealing formula…That knowledge has a value that is practically incalculable."

"We have plenty of time to exploit our prisoner's knowledge," Hiruzen replied sharply. "Before we move on to the attack itself, are there any other outstanding issues we need to discuss?"

Shikaku and Shibi gave matching dismissive shrugs, Jiraiya smiled in that tight, I-am-fucking-pissed-off-but-I-will-save-it-for-later way, and Fugaku looked noticeably uncomfortable and shifted for a long moment before sighing and nodding once.

"There is a matter that must be brought to your attention."

"Anything that has you beating around the bush is worth hearing," Shikaku grumbled lowly. "And certainly not going to improve things for us."

Fugaku's face coloured briefly, but he did not honour the other man with a response: Hiruzen would take that as a promising sign.

"I was not a witness, but apparently Naruto had a dose of the Kyuubi's chakra."

Hiruzen swore and glared at his successor's picture before waving for Fugaku to continue.

"Naruto is not stupid. He is going to have questions and I think they deserve answers."

Hiruzen had never wanted Naruto to grow up knowing the nature of his burden, but a single moment in time had shot down any plans that did not involve informing the boy of the truth. With too many witnesses that were far too young to reliably understand, Uzumaki Naruto would have to be told what a jinchuuriki was.

And while Fugaku did not appear to know about Minato, Naruto would be far better off knowing of Minato's burden as well.

Kami, he was getting too old for this job. Maybe he ought to write Ohnoki and see if old age had afforded them common ground.

"Very well, Fugaku." Hiruzen removed his hat and tossed it to the desk. "I'll sit down and have a discussion with Naruto in a few

days. Should that suffice?"

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." Fugaku resorted to a formal nod and Hiruzen pretended the other man's kindness was not so obvious.

"Back to our infiltrators." Hiruzen folded his hands behind his back and began pacing in front of his assembled men. "Their intentions seem rather conflicting. I want to hear your opinions."

"It is my assertion that Ebisu's use was as a diversion and little else," Shibi said calmly.

Knowing his subordinate as he did, Hiruzen agreed with the Aburame's intuition.

"Nevermind that." Shikaku was more brusque in his attitude than typical, but much had happened, so Hiruzen was not of a mind to judge too harshly. "We need to discuss the relevant details of tonight's attack. And we need to do it quickly."

"Senju Minato's poisoning was not accidental." Jiraiya's voice was hard and Hiruzen knew a lesser man would have been squirming under his student's piercing glare. "When I spoke to her briefly, Tsunade confirmed that the dose Minato received would have been lethal for just about any other child."

A fact that Hiruzen was all too aware of. It was one of the reasons this entire situation was misleading and made him want to doubt. To tuck away his suspicions and pretend he had never feared.

But the death of the revered scion of Konoha's founding clan was not something Sarutobi Hiruzen could ignore. The easy way out would be to point the finger at another village. At this point, Hiruzen could not exactly rule it out and his information was incomplete, but precipitous action like a poisoning did not fit the parameters of another village's interference.

Fact: the attackers explicitly admitted they were to kidnap Uzumaki Naruto. Conflict: kidnapping the Senju heir would be a mark of international prestige that would destroy Konoha's political standing and elevate that of the offensive village. Killing Senju Minato was not a surprise, but it was not the ideal option. It did not fit and Sarutobi was not buying such a lacklustre excuse.

"Killing the Senju heir makes no sense. Especially if

abduction was the goal." Shikaku was glaring at the empty shogi board on Hiruzen's shelf in the corner.

And precisely Hiruzen's thought. Unwisely, Hiruzen looked over at Jiraiya, who was glowering unabashedly at the wall despite his relaxed pretence. There was little doubt that Jiraiya had inferred some details, but if his pupil had picked up on his own suspicions…

"It is my understanding that Uchiha Mikoto killed the other infiltrator," Shibi commented quietly. "The details of that particular incident are factual with no oddities. But while Fugaku's parenting is not in question, I find it peculiar that an elite jounin of Kumogakure could have been killed by his youngest son, who is not yet an Academy student."

"That bothers me too," Fugaku admitted. "It is possible she dismissed him as a threat, but even under those circumstances, she should have been able to react. And the other thing that bothers me is that the Kumo-nin had absolutely no weaponry."

"Nothing?" Shikaku's brow was heavily lined.

"No kunai, no explosive tags, not so much as a senbon." Fugaku looked ready to attack someone, so tense were his muscles. "I've been a shinobi my entire life and I can't rationalize the situation to a point that it makes sense."

"I agree with Fugaku-san." Shikaku inhaled loudly. "The only conclusion I can possibly draw is that the Kumo shinobi's death was intentional."

Hiruzen had to give it to the Nara clan: plots were their bread and butter. No one was safe from those profoundly terrifying brains. The others deserved some credit too. If any of them were surprised, they were not showing it.

"The Raikage's visit was a ruse." Fugaku's mouth wrinkled distastefully. "It was nothing more than a chance to damage Konoha's reputation."

"Perhaps," Shikaku muttered, but Hiruzen knew he was far from convinced.

"And they may have succeeded."

They all turned as the door swung wide to reveal Koharu

stomping into the room in a styled grey kimono and hakama, a scroll clutched to her breast and lips steeled like she was going to war.

"What is it?" Hiruzen asked mechanically, already foreseeing the response.

"The Raikage has left Konoha, but not before delivering this missive into my hands." Koharu's wrinkled face was particularly neutral, but her eyes skimmed over his present company before falling meaningfully on Fugaku. "Kumo is demanding the head of the Uchiha responsible for the death of their shinobi. If we do not meet this request, they have intimated a threat of war."

In a full council chamber, Koharu's declaration would have had a significantly higher impact, but the present company was alert, if rather stone-faced.

To everyone's surprise, Shibi was the first to react.

"Impossible. Uchiha Sasuke's action was nothing short of commendable considering his circumstances. And while a state of war is undesirable, I perceive no viable options worthy of consideration. The Aburame clan will support the Uchiha clan and Konoha."

The Uchiha were not a clan ruled by their emotions, so Hiruzen was pleasantly surprised by how moved Fugaku seemed to be by Shibi's little proclamation.

"Troublesome," Shikaku muttered. The Nara looked first meaningfully to Hiruzen before turning toward the shell-shocked Fugaku. "You and I are not exactly friends, but I could see potential for growth between our families, Uchiha. Whatever is decided, we'll back you."

Another war, then. Konoha could ill-afford one, especially if another village joined forces with Kumo. Konoha could fight and perhaps even win, but there would be little left of their people if it came to another half-decade of bloodshed and despair.

"Hokage-sama, I understand the importance of responding to this issue, but I would ask for a bit of time before the Raikage's demand is publicized?"

War? Or had something else happened, that he had not foreseen?

“I can delay informing the council until dawn. A few hours, Fugaku.”

“Thank you.” Fugaku’s reaction was grave. “I ask to be dismissed.”

“By all means.” Hiruzen waved his hand.

As soon as the man stepped out of the room, Shikaku stepped forward.

“Hokage-sama, is this room secure?”

Hiruzen motioned to Jiraiya, who instantly began refreshing a series of security seals and sealing the door. Koharu sniffed but moved to stand next to him while Shibi stood uncomfortably off to the side.

“We’re clear.”

“Hokage-sama?” Shikaku’s voice sounded almost resigned.

“Speak your mind.”

Confirm that I’m not crazy.

“A is not known for his political savvy or subterfuge, but the Raikage is characterized by protective instincts, pride, and blunt honesty. The threat he poses is real. I have no doubt that his threat of war is serious, but this situation itself is wrong. The Kumo shinobi’s death and A’s outrage factor together fine, but the circumstances of the Kumo-nin’s death are far too suspect.”

“Kumo is being used.” Jiraiya grunted. “The natural thing to do is to decide who has the most to gain by sabotaging a treaty between Konoha and Kumo.”

“The obvious conclusion would be an enemy of Konoha,” Shibi surmised, “but at present, our only lead is the peculiar behaviour of a Kumo shinobi whose death may have been instigated by an outside force. Perhaps the fuinjutsu master that caused Ebisu to fight his own comrades bears some responsibility.”

“Unfortunately, that's not outside the realm of possibility.” Shikaku looked improbably upset by this analysis. “But I doubt that possibility will sway the Raikage.”

“Neither do I.” Hiruzen turned and shared a look with Koharu. “Neither do I.”

Danzo…what have you done? And what will you force me to do, old friend?

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Fugaku would not have been able to relay any details of his journey from the Hokage’s office to the hospital.

A dilemma had been presented. A dilemma that Fugaku would have scoffed at before, but things were different now. His family was different now.

Since the day of his father’s passing, Fugaku had known that any frivolous pursuits he once had were over. The future of the Uchiha had to take precedence over all else. And so, they had.

Mikoto had borne the weight of Fugaku’s new responsibilities with dignity. The smiling, outspoken girl he had fallen in love with receded in favour of the new, proud matriarch. Fugaku had imagined himself proud when his wife became increasingly soft-spoken and relinquished her duty as a kunoichi to attend to her new role of doting wife.

Fugaku had busied himself with ensuring a prosperous future for his clan and buried any guilt he felt at leaving Mikoto to raise their firstborn with little assistance. Fugaku had felt confident about the future of the Uchiha inside of Konoha. The Uchiha had everything to live for and far too little to die for.

Until Namikaze Minato’s untimely death and the subsequent condemnation from the rest of the village. It had been quiet and subtle, but the attitudes of the villagers had become unmistakeably frosty in the past few years. And while it was not an unfair assumption to suggest that the Uchiha bore a share of the blame for not fighting preconceived notions, the lack of amicable relations with other clans had been just another stroke of bad luck.

And then came a day that had seemed barely beyond the ordinary. A breakfast eaten at his work desk, a citation issued for public indecency, and papers approving the transfer of a potential spy to the interrogation division. Everything was exactly as he expected it to be until he went home and discovered a place entirely alien to the
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one he left that morning. And adopting Namikaze's son had certainly not been on his agenda, yet that too had happened.

Fugaku had not expected to feel the remorse he had felt that night, that guilt that had haunted him every night since. Mikoto's fury, her lack of subservience, and a spirit that Fugaku had almost forgotten had all resurfaced with a vengeance. Initially, Fugaku had been dismayed by his wife's sudden infusion of rebellion, but that piece of himself—that aspect that had fallen in love with Mikoto's fiery personality—woke up.

Fugaku had half-believed he had imagined Mikoto's behaviour, but in the following days she had become more than the shell of a person that had been sleeping next to him for the last decade. The person he had thought himself happy to lose for duty's sake had been returned to him by the miracle of adoption. Instead of easy coexistence, Fugaku returned home to gentle chiding, light teasing, and a renewed physicality that both elated and terrified him.

And in turn, Fugaku saw a pronounced change in his children. While Naruto's prankster habits left something to be desired, Fugaku could not deny his pleasure at seeing Sasuke becoming more settled and more confident. Itachi was not like some distant, aloof mountain; his eldest smiled easier and engaged with Sasuke more often. Seeing these changes flourish with the presence of Naruto and the Senju boy, Fugaku understood what he had lost in these past few years: what Itachi had never had, and what Sasuke had at last.

The change in the Uchiha clan as a whole in the last few months had been incredible. In partial response to his son's friendship with Hiashi's daughter, his clansmen had opened a dialogue with other clans. Instead of the rebuff they anticipated, the Uchiha had began inter-clan trading and many of them were now engaging in recreational hours with shinobi from other families. In particular, the Aburame's transition into the police force was met with a surprising lack of hostility. And better yet, the force members rotated to regular village duty had reported a high degree of success and amicability following successful missions.

And then, of course, the Hokage's promise: an Uchiha would become the Godaime Hokage. And in order to facilitate this, Itachi would become the Sandaime's apprentice within the next few months. It was everything Fugaku had wanted and everything he had never hoped for.

The clan flourished, and his family came to life. Fugaku has been hesitant to integrate himself into their joy simply because he feared he had forgotten how to live outside of duty.

And now it was too late.

The Raikage's demand had to be answered or their lack of response would itself be deemed an answer. And a solution that Fugaku would have sneered at before was now something he was considering very seriously.

Fugaku would never have hesitated to die protecting his family, but his imagination had always conjured up potential invaders or death on a mission–not choosing to offer himself up to the demands of a demented foreign Kage.

Outside his wife's room, a few highly recognizable faces were standing at the door. The lot of them perked up as he approached.

Putting on his game face, Fugaku smiled courteously and found himself staving off amazement at the fact that important figures from other clans were standing vigil outside his wife's room. Nara Yoshino was exchanging words with Hiashi of all people. And that seemed to be Shibi's wife, Mitsuri, interrogating a nervous-looking nurse just off to the side.

"How—" Fugaku paused. "How is my family?"

"Tsunade is evaluating Mikoto-san," Aburame Mitsuri offered demurely. "And her condition seems to have stabilized. Please let her know that we will return to visit her another time."

"You have my sincerest thanks for your concern." Fugaku looked to each in turn. "I know my wife would be touched by your presence here."

Mitsuri simply nodded affably in true Aburame fashion while Yoshino stepped in to pat him gruffly on the shoulder, a sad twinkle to her eye that suggested she had discerned something in that singularly Nara manner.

"What are friends for, Uchiha?" What indeed. "Shou will bring food for your family and my family will stand behind yours."

Fugaku's lips quirked. "Thank you."

The two women disappeared, leaving only an awkward-looking Hiashi behind. As he gazed at his former rival, Fugaku had the wistful notion of missed opportunities. Hiashi seemed to be thinking along the same lines because the man hesitated before leaving, turned away to stare at the wall, and spoke quietly.

"My daughter has refused to leave. Your wife has made quite the impression on her."

Fugaku's lips twitched. Yet more proof that the world was changing and the Uchiha right along with it.

"Her presence is welcome. She may stay as long as she wishes."

Fugaku just knew his father was rolling in his grave. For the first time, that thought seemed far more amusing than upsetting.

"Thank you. I will collect her tomorrow."

Believing their business concluded, Fugaku moved to step around the other man and nearly attacked him when a warm hand deliberately grabbed his shoulder and squeezed.

"I know what it is to lose someone you love. It changes who you are."

Fugaku listened to Hiashi's voice and almost faltered at the twang of desperation cloaking each word.

"Tonight, I was reminded of exactly what I have to live for. I will always be thankful for what your family has done for me."

Without another word, Hiashi disappeared down the hallway, leaving Fugaku more conflicted than when he arrived.

The door swung open and a semi-dishevelled Senju Tsunade poked her head out and beckoned him inside.

"Heard you skulking about the hallway, Uchiha."

Fugaku refrained from commenting and followed her into the dimly lit room.

On the nearest bed, Senju Minato looked fragile and tiny tucked beneath white sheets and a thin, green blanket. Kakashi was dead to the world with his head pillowed on the edge of the mattress

and one of the boy's hands carding through the silver spikes with a fond smile. The boy himself stirred at their entry and lifted a hand to wave in their direction, but otherwise offered no greeting.

A long curtain partitioned the room and only the shadow of an occupied hospital bed showed Fugaku where Mikoto was resting.

Across the room, huddled on some chairs that had clearly been stolen from the waiting area, were the children.

Hyuuga Hinata was sitting next to Naruto, holding his hand: a bridge between two families. Itachi looked pale, distraught, and his Sharingan was bright and unwavering in their focus on Sasuke's face. Sasuke still had his fingers bunched in his pants and seemed like he was about to break down if anyone so much as looked at him.

How normal. And how Fugaku loathed himself more than he ever had. Sasuke, his little boy, who was not yet out of his mother's apron skirts, had killed—had been forced to kill when Fugaku had not been there.

Fugaku crossed the distance between them, crouched in front of his son, and cupped the far too small face with his much larger hands. There was a stirring as eyes turned to stare back into his: Fugaku did not care. Sasuke needed him and, for once, his family would come first. Fugaku would be the father he always should have been.

"Sasuke." The command snapped his son's head up and those dark pools of ebony shone with confusion. "I'm proud of you."

"What?" The disbelief was plain as day.

"Your Kaa-san was nearly killed, Sasuke." Fugaku refused to coddle his son with half-truths. The boy had taken his first, unfortunate step into an adult world. Sheltering him now would do more harm than good. "Would you have preferred she die?"

The response was instantaneous and came from more than one mouth.

"*No!*" Naruto and Sasuke shouted in unison.

Fugaku allowed his gaze to wander from one to the other and back again.

"If you had not killed that Kumo-nin, it is very possible she may have killed your Kaa-san *and* your friends. You did exactly as you should have done. You protected those that are important to you. And I am proud of you, my son."

A moment later, Fugaku had his arms full of Sasuke, who was doing a good job of soaking the fabric on his shoulder. Not caring an iota for what anyone else thought, he hugged his son and stroked his spiky head gently. In that moment of tranquility, he was fortunate enough to see the surprise and knowledge in Itachi's dark eyes. A question lay there.

Fugaku nodded once and regretted the way his eldest's now dark eyes widened for an instant with heartbreak before closing again.

There was another presence at his leg. Fugaku reached down and scooped Naruto into his arms as well. The blond nestled in perfectly next to his brother and Fugaku's heart swelled.

"Naruto, I'm sorry you had a terrible experience tonight too."

"Tou-san, I was really mad and really scared," the blond babbled incoherently into his ear. "And something happened that was just…I don't really know what it was and—"

"What happened is something that will be explained to you soon. I promise you that. For now, know that you are my son and nothing will ever change that. Do you understand?"

Watery blues blinked up at him in shock.

"I understand, Tou-san."

"Good."

Fugaku hugged his children to him once more before setting them down.

"How is the Senju boy?"

"Minato-chan is going to be okay. He's just sleeping now." Naruto accepted his alteration in topic with ease.

"Tsunade-sama made it so that Minato can share a room with Kaa-san," Sasuke whispered in a voice that lacked the fractured

desperation of earlier. “It’s good because we can check on them both at the same time.”

So young and his son already had a better heart than Fugaku did.

“Good.”

Fugaku pulled away from his boys, looked away from Itachi’s betrayed stare, and even patted Hinata’s cheek fondly before turning a duty-laden eye back to the Sannin.

“My wife?”

“Mikoto should wake up anytime now,” Tsunade said, tucking a clipboard under her arm tiredly. “Recovery won’t be instant, but I don’t foresee any long-term problems.”

“And Minato?”

“He’ll be alright too.” She turned an eye on the boy, looking relieved and not entirely convinced of the reality of the situation.

“I’m pleased to hear that,” Fugaku replied. The next part would be harder but ultimately necessary. “Thank you for saving Mikoto.”

“Thank the children.” Tsunade turned away, a flicker of shame touching that proud face. “Without them, I doubt I would have been able to go through with it.”

“Itachi.” His eldest straightened. “I want a minute alone with your Kaa-san. Please watch the boys.”

The boys threw Tsunade pleading looks and she simply rolled her eyes.

“Go see him, but let him rest. He needs it.” Instantly his boys scurried to Minato’s bed and began hauling themselves onto it with one on either side of their friend. Tsunade took up a seat next to a freshly roused Kakashi while Itachi stood off to the side—staring right at him.

Fugaku tried to give his son a reassuring look, but knew he failed when Itachi turned his back to him. As much as it hurt him to know that Itachi was suffering, Fugaku knew he had to prioritize. And

these next few minutes were for him and his wife alone.

Fugaku pushed back the edge of the curtain. It had been a long time since Mikoto had been hurt, but the uneasiness in his gut remained the same. An IV ran down his wife's arm and she was dressed in the plain linen gown that every patient had the misfortune of wearing.

He was not exactly sure what he should have expected, but it wasn't the way his wife stirred without opening her eyes and lifted a hand into the air. Fugaku was by her side in an instant, weaving their fingers together and sitting next to her with his head bowed over their linked hands.

"I love you," he breathed out tenderly.

It had not been what Fugaku had planned on saying, but Mikoto deserved to hear it. In fact, she had been a far better wife than he should have had. If speaking these words was the least he could do, Fugaku would do it.

"Hmm, knew you were here," she murmured to him softly, smiling even as her eyes remained shut.

"You always seem to know." Fugaku pressed his lips to the dry skin of the back of his wife's hands, absently massaging her fingers with his own. "I've never been able to keep anything from you. Not really."

"Hmm." Mikoto blinked dreamily at him as her eyes opened, and Fugaku felt his heart beat a bit faster as her lips parted in a toothy smile. "I know you better than you know yourself. It's always been that way."

"Yes," Fugaku admitted gently. "Today, you frightened me greatly."

"Not sorry," she said, with that twinkle in her eye and that smile on her lips.

Fugaku could not help himself; he laughed at that. A brief, startled sound that he no longer recognized, as disused as it was.

"Nor would I ask you to be."

Fugaku turned her hand over and kissed her palm the way

he had when they were just two young people in love. The way he had stopped doing the day he had become clan head.

"I missed that."

Fugaku allowed himself a brief smile, all too aware that Mikoto was scrutinizing him in that singularly wifely way.

"I think I did too. I've missed a lot of things. *We* have missed a lot of things. I'm sorry it took me so long to apologize for that. And if I had another lifetime, it would not be enough to apologize for what I've taken from you."

"I think you're being a little hard on yourself."

Fugaku felt his eyes burn and he breathed against the flesh of her palm.

"I almost lost you, I think I'm entitled to a few apologies."

His wife's fingers moved then. A few traced his face, pausing over the moisture on his cheeks, before falling to his chin and coaxing it upward. Fugaku acquiesced and smiled sadly at Mikoto, who was searching his face for something with a pinched frown.

"You've never apologized to me before," Mikoto said finally. "This isn't like you."

A thousand regrets and one more. Fugaku had never disliked himself as much as he did in that moment. But he could tell that Mikoto was tired and there was still one question he needed to ask her. One final piece to this puzzle.

"Why did you do it?"

"You would rather I let our children die?" The raspy query was almost amused.

"That isn't what I meant and you know it."

"Protecting people is why I wanted to be a shinobi, Fugaku. That hasn't changed."

"Protecting people." Fugaku tasted the words, feeling them out. "Even if we had lost you?"

Something like understanding flooded Mikoto's face and she

caressed his cheek softly before dropping her hand to the cheap coverlet.

"Dying for someone else…I can't think of a better way to go. I think you would understand that."

"I'm starting to."

Mikoto's eyes fluttered shut and she felt around with her hand before finding his again and squeezing it.

"I love you, but I'm having a hard time staying awake."

Fugaku leaned in closer and ran the back of his hand over her soft, smooth skin. He smiled when slits of ebony peeked at him from beneath heavy lids.

"I've never deserved you, Koto," he whispered, leaning in close enough for their noses to brush. "Without you, my life would never have been worth living. I'm thankful for you and *all* of our children."

"I'm going to have to get stabbed more often if it turns you sappy." Mikoto sighed softly.

"Don't you dare." Fugaku leaned down and kissed one eyelid and then the other. "My sons need their Kaa-san."

"And you?" Mikoto mumbled.

Fugaku pressed his lips to Mikoto's forehead, closed his eyes, and shuddered once more.

"I have everything I've ever wanted."

And I've understood its value far too late. Nevertheless, I'm grateful for you, my love.

"I want you to rest now." Fugaku eased back, daring to activate his Sharingan for a single instant to memorize the peaceful smile on his dozing wife's face. "I'm going to go see the boys and take care of something."

"You work too hard."

"Someone has to."

Fugaku conceded to the lure and dipped his head down to press a kiss to his wife's lips tenderly.

"Come back soon."

Fugaku almost faltered at that, but he simply pulled away and forced himself to retreat, pausing at the edge of the bed.

"Get some rest, Koto."

Fugaku was a mess. He knew that every mission during the war had a possibility of death, but knowing the outcome ahead of time seemed to change things drastically. Fugaku had always loved Mikoto, but realizing he would be the cause of her suffering in the coming days was another matter entirely.

And not just for Mikoto, but for his sons.

Fugaku stepped beyond the curtain and found himself at a loss for words. What exactly could he say here?

Naruto noticed him right off the bat and had already shimmied off the hospital bed and walked up to him hopefully.

"Can we see Kaa-san now, Tou-san?"

Naruto was standing just as straight as Sasuke did with an inflection of respectful deference in his tone. The blond had grown a bit taller too and possessed a healthy glow that he formerly lacked. And strangest of all, Naruto was looking at him with that childish adoration that Sasuke sometimes displayed. A yearning for approval tempered by affection directed at Fugaku—not Namikaze Minato—but his reluctant adoptive parent.

"I have some things to take care of." Fugaku uncharacteristically allowed himself to bend down and open his arms to both boys, who were scrambling toward him. "Come say goodbye."

He caught both children and lifted them. Hugged them.

"You two have grown," Fugaku mused. "I missed that."

"Just you wait, Tou-san!" Naruto whispered. "Soon we'll be taller than you are."

Sasuke did not say anything at all; his boy's eyes were haunted and he seemed to thrive from the proximity.

“I’m very proud of you both,” Fugaku whispered. “Keep making me proud?”

“Of course,” Naruto answered for the both of them.

“Alright, no climbing on Kaa-san.” Fugaku shooed them away, feeling like he was already dying as the boys zipped around the curtain. “And only do that for a few minutes.”

The Hyuuga girl lingered uncertainly before scooting around him and rushing after the boys.

Fugaku bypassed Itachi and paused beside the other bed, where the small child resting there appeared to be sleeping. Kakashi, however, was eyeing him with a far too knowing look.

“Keep my boys out of trouble, Senju Minato.” Fugaku patted the boy’s shoulder gently.

The boy had been more of a pain than a blessing, but Fugaku saw the way he gently manipulated his children into being better people.

Not bothering with Hatake, Fugaku went to where Itachi was standing and guided his son out of the hospital room.

“Walk with me.”

They did not exchange words inside. Instead, Fugaku wrapped an arm around his son’s shoulder in a manner he never had before and glowered defiantly at any observers if their attention lingered a second longer than necessary.

Outside the hospital, only a few people loitered, but Fugaku quietly guided Itachi to an isolated corner, surprised when he took the initiative.

“I will never see you again.”

“No,” he agreed far too easily.

“Kaa-san will not understand.” Itachi spoke--much too calm, as usual. “Sasuke will be angry.”

“And you?”

What will you feel, my son?

“You are doing this for the village. And our family. It’s the correct choice.”

“Have I disappointed you, Itachi?”

I already know my parenting has lacked. I’ve raised you to be an Uchiha that surpasses all others, but I’ve never really taken the time to get to know you. To ask what you want. I’ve failed at being your father.

Forgive me, Itachi.

“No.” Itachi looked at him and Fugaku’s breath caught. “I’ve never loved you better.”

Fugaku had seen a thousand smiles, but nothing like this. Itachi was smiling in a way that highlighted tears and embodied joy. For the first time, his son was not pretending: Itachi was happy.

“Thank you.” Fugaku crushed his firstborn to his chest and wept silently.

If dying came with a consolation prize, it was knowing that he had redeemed a child he had failed before his birth. Fugaku pulled away with a last gentle kiss to his son’s forehead.

“Lead with your heart, my son. I know you will make me proud.”

Fugaku pulled back, mesmerised by Itachi’s tears and the true emotions buried in those eyes.

“Goodbye, my son.”

Fugaku let his shunshin carry him away, wanting to savour the moment.

Sarutobi Hiruzen did not look surprised to see him, but he certainly looked aggrieved.

“I have a few things I would like to finalize with you and a few favours I would like to call upon, Hokage-sama, but there will be no war.” Fugaku’s resolve hardened. “Not if I can prevent it.”

“You are an incredible man, Fugaku.”

“I am a shinobi of Konoha.” Fugaku smiled faintly. “I’ve come to serve.”

Chapter End Notes

Hearing from you guys always makes my day! Love you guys!

Chapter 14: Many Farewells

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun had not yet risen to banish the shadows and bring about a new day. There was an eerie, almost disquieting stillness blanketing the village. Streets were all but empty and even the seedier parts of town were unnaturally devoid of activity.

The Sandaime's bedroom was likewise dark, with only the unearthly glow of moonlight peeking through the panelled shutters of his room.

Beneath his hands, Koharu was pliant and deceptively soft. In Hiruzen's opinion, kunoichi aged better than painted civilian housewives ever could, but Koharu's body was not something most would consider attractive. Her breasts sagged, her face was lined, and her belly protruded with the roundness of retired life.

But there was a spark in her eyes and he could feel the resilience of her chakra that had aged like fine wine. And when his fingers found the scars, he knew this was a woman that had killed. That was an allure that bypassed all deficits in the realm of appearance.

Besides, he was under no illusion that he was a spring chicken either. Nor was he the spry young man that had demolished battalions of shinobi single-handedly. Age changed many things and masked even more.

Hiruzen had mapped the jagged scar tissue clumping around the base of Koharu's spine, laid back while Koharu lifted and lowered herself like a teenager, and felt the firm calluses on her hands as their fingers tangled together.

There was certainly affection between them, but not in the way it had been with Biwako. This had not been the first time Koharu slept with him. Over the years, they had lain together a handful of times. Often, when it served a purpose or when Hiruzen was emotionally overwrought, Koharu sought him out—as she had tonight. The woman had a knack for reading his moods like no one else.

When she showed up at his office an hour shy of midnight,

Hiruzen never questioned the surge of relief he experienced. Sex easily served as a method of alleviating frustrations. It did not have to involve romanticism or love. He wanted to expel some tension: it was just that simple.

Afterward, they lay together shoulder to shoulder. Neither of them were the sort of people that were prone to excessive touching. Not to say that they did not enjoy being close from time to time, but it was not a necessity for Hiruzen like it had been with Biwako. Touch was something to be enjoyed in the moment, but not always required.

Koharu did not stir when Hiruzen climbed off the bed. The floor creaked gently as he walked over the planks toward the balcony and opened the door, stepping out into the darkness without a scrap of clothing on him.

It was such a peculiar night. Not a cricket or owl nearby; only a fierce wind that licked his bare flesh with a touch of cold. A mere trickle of chakra running through his skin did much to artificially preserve his warmth even if it did nothing for his modesty.

Uchiha Fugaku was dead. Had been dead for two days now. Fugaku had opted for painless poison taken orally after they finalized arrangements together. There had never been a bond between himself and the Uchiha patriarch, not like he had with the Yondaime. Nevertheless, Hiruzen could honestly say he had been gifted a thorough, complex insight into Fugaku as a person.

Death was an inevitability, but it had the peculiar side-effect of providing witnesses with an intimate glimpse of the soul. Sarutobi Hiruzen had seen many men at their last, but Uchiha Fugaku had proven himself nothing short of remarkable at the end. Remarkable, and a harsh reminder of the definition of duty.

Hiruzen performed a short, coded whistle. Half a moment later, the ANBU squad captain was on his knees before him, awaiting orders and entirely unconcerned with his Kage's nudity. It was precisely the sort of professionalism he expected and Hiruzen would count on considerably more discretion by dawn.

"Gather Nara Shikaku, Jiraiya, and the current interim Police Force Captain, Aburame Shibi. Additionally, you are to pass on a reactivation order to ANBU Dog, effective immediately. And please ask Shizune to meet me at the hospital in just over an hour.

"The two of you will join us for a meeting in my office in a

quarter of an hour. This is an S-rank secrecy gathering. Dismissed."

ANBU Bear vanished and left the Hokage to his thoughts.

The Uchiha Clan as a whole would be consumed by the mourning process for the time being. The funeral itself would be held late tomorrow afternoon with an early evening gathering at the compound that he would have to appear at.

If he wanted to act, it would have to be now. As a Hokage, there was no choice.

Aside from Fugaku's death, Hiruzen's office had been busy making arrangements for the handoff of Fugaku's body to the Kumo bastards. And just yesterday, Hiruzen had been forced to explain to Naruto the meaning of "jinchuuriki" and how it pertained to him. That alone would have been problematic enough, but Hiruzen had been called away before Naruto could readjust his frame of mind.

The reaction of the general citizenry to Fugaku's death—heroic suicide—surprised him. Such a radical turn of events had inspired the majority of Konoha's populace. The citizenry rallied overnight, sentiment in Konoha becoming aggressively anti-Kumo. The police force had been inundated with reports of violently public disturbances involving vandalism of shops advertising exports from Lightning Country and harassing travellers hailing from the region. And the once reviled Uchiha Clan were now being treated to free meals in nearly every venue in Konoha and discounts everywhere else.

None of this mattered. All of it was small potatoes to what would be going on behind the scenes in the next few hours. And a few riots were the perfect cover to work under.

Uchiha Fugaku was dead and it certainly was not because A had a temper tantrum.

Well, then, I suppose there really is no choice. The Yondaime never had to learn this lesson. Perhaps he was the lucky one after all.

There was a low sigh, muttering about irritating old codgers, and soft footfalls before something soft and warm was draped over his shoulders.

"You're going to catch your death standing out there like that." Koharu's voice called to him from inside.

“Thank you.”

The comforter was still warm and cozy. It felt pleasant on his old bones.

“Don’t thank me,” Koharu snipped. Her thinning silver hair was loose around her face and the robe she was wearing has been hastily tied. “If you want to stand outside naked in the middle of the night, that just lends credence to the notion that you’ve lost your marbles. But, Hiruzen, don’t subject your protective detail to this. Trust me, a hundred kills are nothing when you have to look at your Kage’s shrivelled manhood swinging in the breeze.”

Hiruzen laughed for the first time in days. Wrapping an arm around Koharu’s bony shoulders, he tugged his friend close and was pleased when she allowed the embrace and even leaned into him.

“You’re right, of course.” Hiruzen squeezed Koharu tighter, smiling as she wrapped a reciprocating arm around him.

“I’m right most of the time,” Koharu quipped.

“Debatable.”

“Hmm.”

They stood together for a long moment, just quiet. Some people found silence uncomfortable and sought to fill that quiet with words, but a good shinobi understood that you could learn just as much from what was unsaid.

Perhaps, all things considered, it was for the best.

“Introspection is well and good, but most people don’t know you the way I do, Hiruzen.” Koharu finally confronted him. "You’ve been mulling something over. Something serious. In fact, I daresay I haven’t seen you like this in more than ten years.”

Insight was certainly a gift, but definitely not for the ears of the masses.

Coaxing Koharu inside was easy enough. And the estate had privacy seals that trumped even some in his office thanks to Uzumaki Mito and her sentiments concerning Hokage bedroom privilege.

Hiruzen replaced the quilt on his bed and sat with his back

to the headboard. Koharu divested herself of her robe for the second time in so many hours and reclaimed her spot beside him, propped up on a veritable mountain of pillows.

"When I picked Namikaze as my successor, I knew he was what Konoha deserved for a Hokage. But, from a more selfish point of view, I saw a man capable of meting out the corruption that had begun to fester in the village."

Koharu said nothing. Instead, she folded her arms around her midsection as if to ward off a chill before nodding for him to continue.

"The day we were informed that Uzumaki Kushina was pregnant by the Yondaime, I remember Danzo suggesting we abort the fetus. The rest of us were against it and began helping the two of them prepare in secret."

"I remember that day very well."

"The night the Yondaime died, I remember looking down at Naruto for a moment and thinking to myself, *Danzo was right! If Kushina had not been pregnant, none of this would have come to pass.*"

The remembrance of the gut-wrenching shame that had encompassed his being after having that thought had been almost too painful to stand.

"I love Naruto-kun like a grandson, but I was selfish for a moment. I did not want to become Hokage again."

"Because of Biwako's death?" Koharu's brow furrowed.

"No." Hiruzen smiled emptily, knowing that putting words to the weight of a title was impossible to explain. "Becoming a Hokage means giving up parts of yourself that you did not know you were going to lose. And putting on the hat again, well…I'm sure you can appreciate that the cost was heavier the second time around."

"Your point? You really are trying my patience, old man."

That's the spirit. Koharu was difficult to reach at times, but he felt a yearning to explain himself and be understood by another person. Even if it was just for a moment, Hiruzen wanted to be just a man again…just for a moment.

“Why did you follow Danzo for so long?”

“You know why.”

“I do know why. And I also know that Danzo makes incredibly persuasive arguments and offers insight that is often correct.”

“He does.” It came out a bit unwillingly.

“Danzo’s organization has been instrumental to assisting Konoha in varying capacities. I restricted his activities—or so I thought—but I gave him considerable leeway. Except this time, he’s gone too far.”

Koharu breathed shakily.

“Fugaku?”

“And Tobirama’s son.” He had never openly called the boy that, but Koharu’s sharp inhale proved his point had been made.

“Alright, okay.” Koharu sat up briskly, fumbling around in the dark. “I’ll see if I can find anything out.”

“Koharu.”

She froze. Slowly, she turned with something akin to fear taking root in her eyes.

“There comes a time when a tree needs pruning. I let him grow far too bold as it is.”

“You’re testing me,” Koharu replied flatly. If she was surprised, she was doing a perfect job hiding it. “And you actually mean to—”

“Yes.”

“Hiruzen, he is your friend.”

“Then you haven’t been listening.”

Hiruzen dressed silently and swiftly. His muscles bore the weight of his armour like an old friend and even though the fit was not quite as it had been even four years ago, it felt like coming home. His robes went on overtop, creating a living illusion stronger than one

constructed by chakra. Taking care to place the hat on his head, he turned back to Koharu.

She was kneeling with her robe wrapped around herself weeping silently. Hiruzen returned to her side, bent over the trembling woman, and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I am the Hokage and I will do what I must,” Hiruzen said, not unkindly.

“I will be right behind you, Hokage-sama.” Koharu distanced herself with the title, but there was no anger in her voice.

It was premature to call that a victory, but he was nonetheless pleased that she appeared to understand even if she did not agree with it.

It was a simple matter to make out his escort detail creeping over the rooftops as he exited his home. A discreet hand sign and they all vanished and reappeared outside the tower and climbed the stairs to his office.

The chunin guarding his door executed a few quick jutsu unapologetically to check for identity. Hiruzen approved the thoroughness and made a note to bump up the man’s salary a tick for his professionalism.

Pushing the door open, Hiruzen took note of ANBU Bear and Dog standing at attention off to the side. Jiraiya was rummaging through the reports and did not bother looking up as he entered the room. Nara Shikaku was sitting in a chair with a permanent scowl affixed to his face. Shibi remained standing, looking impeccably professional.

“This better be good,” Jiraiya muttered.

“Jiraiya.”

Scuffles were heard throughout the room as everyone stood and even Jiraiya was taken aback by the command in Hiruzen’s voice. Behind them, the door opened to admit Koharu dressed in a hasty rendition of her normal attire. None of her prior weakness was in attendance and he tracked her to where she took a stand at his side, body language firmly neutral.

Well enough.

“Jiraiya, seal the room.”

It took all of a minute and it was rather informative. Nara Shikaku was obviously trying to make a determination and Hiruzen was willing to bet the other man was almost right on the money. Shibi was as unreadable as stone. The ANBU might be masked, but Kakashi’s posture was rigid and he was aware that there would be many, many questions later. Tenzo was silent and unassuming, but his body language deferred to Kakashi on a seemingly unconscious level. That was certainly something worth noting.

“I’m ordering the S-rank assassination of Elder Shimura Danzo.”

His announcement was met by raised brows, much swearing from Shikaku, and widespread uncertainty.

“What charge?” Jiraiya rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Officially, probably the illegal ANBU and unauthorized ops Danzo has been running.” Shikaku had his eyes closed as he spoke. “Based on the holes and the inconsistencies behind the actions of the missing-nin and the aberrant behaviour of the Kumo-nin, someone else must be factored in. While it could be one of our enemies, or even a smaller village trying to pit the Great Nations against each other, Shimura Danzo has a reputation that is well-deserved.”

“Is Danzo responsible for the attacks made against specific targets?” It was not unusual for an ANBU captain to participate in mission discussion, but Kakashi was obviously fishing for a very personal reason.

“Sonovabitch! So when they targeted those kids… goddammit!”

Jiraiya smashed his fist against the edge of the desk, putting a sizeable crack in the wood. He was no Tsunade, but all of Hiruzen's students were frighteningly strong and temperamental in their own ways.

“I want to end this with as few casualties as possible,” Hiruzen continued, coolly ignoring Jiraiya’s anger. “Shikaku, if I gave you full discretion, could you arrange for the Ishida woman to be cooperative?”

His Jounin Commander’s eyebrows nearly reached the edge

of his hairline, but Shikaku stroked his beard once before nodding thoughtfully.

"Full discretion?"

Curiosity was to be expected. Full discretion implied potentially offering to induct a foreign agent into their own forces with a promise of freedom in exchange for cooperation. It had happened only a handful of times and only under highly extenuating circumstances. Considering the woman's value and what they would gain today if she agreed, it was well worth it, by his careful estimation.

"Full discretion." He nodded, not overlooking the sudden flare of killing intent from Kakashi. "But only if she knows something about…" Hiruzen retrieved a crude representation of a seal that was missing a dozen components that Mito had never taught him to make. "This particular seal is amazingly potent but almost impossible to use, but…I think we have just the circumstance. If she is able to recreate this seal, you may offer her whatever you deem necessary."

"I'll accompany him to assess the seal itself." Jiraiya grunted, moving past to stand next to Shikaku.

"That would certainly be beneficial, Jiraiya-sama."

"Shibi."

The other man nodded curtly.

"I want you to coordinate with ANBU Bear on a tactical strike of certain underground facilities operated by Root shinobi under Shimura Danzo. Koharu will have more detailed information on the layouts."

Instead of questioning him, Shibi simply nodded. "What sort of resistance can we expect?"

"You may not expect much of any," Jiraiya said. "If Danzo goes down quickly, Root may cooperate with us completely. Otherwise, I would expect them to fight you tooth and nail. Either way, we'll need a holding facility for all the Root shinobi."

"Danzo has children; they will need to be cordoned off separately."

Killing intent radiated from just about everyone in the room aside from himself and Koharu, who had already been aware. He shared a look with her and found himself almost amused by how she was shaking her head. At least they were all on the same page again.

"Dog, I have a special assignment for you. Stay behind. The rest of you meet in the conference room in an hour."

"Sir?"

"Danzo gave the order to poison Senju Minato." Hiruzen offered truth to test reactions. As he had hoped, Kakashi's self-restraint was perfect save for the flash of killing intent that would have had lesser men pissing their pants in fear. "I have an S-rank mission for you. This mission will be off the record and monetary compensation will be delayed a few weeks to allay suspicion. Do you accept?"

"I accept." Good. No hesitation and no fear. "What are my orders?"

A ghost of a smile twisted onto Hiruzen's face. Time to get to work.

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Minato woke, feeling groggy and smelling smoke.

Kami, what now?

Shoving back the covers, he rolled out of bed and followed the cloud of smoke to the kitchen. An unattended pot was boiling over, but it was the oven mitt that had carelessly been left next to the pot that was engulfed in flames that were dangerously close to licking the edge of the counter.

Reacting on instinct, Minato blazed through the hand signs for a campfire-dousing jutsu. A jet of water easily four times the strength it should have been shimmered into existence and instantly smothered the flame. Alongside the smoke, puffy white clouds of steam covered the oven area.

It was then that he registered the dampness on the floor.

There was a sizeable puddle of water growing around his
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feet that made the waxed floor just that much more slippery. And looking beyond the steamy, charred stove and partially melted cookware, Minato saw that the size and velocity of his jutsu had saturated the cabinets and countertops with the spray.

What had he done?

Minato had just pulled the water from nothing. He had manipulated water molecules in the air. Holy shit. That was seriously awesome and a little bit terrifying.

"That…shouldn't have gone like that."

'**You understood the theory behind the technique, idiot. You read it once upon a lifetime, when the Sandaime gave you access to Tobirama's notes so that you could study the Hiraishin. And instead of just reading his notes on sealing, you read every little detail like the fangirl you secretly were and still are. And now you're the guy's son. Congratulations. Water manipulation should be piss easy for you.**'

'*Kurama, that is not how elemental manipulation works! Understanding the theory does not mean you can perform it. The precision required is astronomical and I refuse to believe notes I read almost two decades ago gave me any advantage.*'

'***Fine.***' Minato winced as Kurama growled irritably. '**I wanted to test something out and it might have overloaded your jutsu a bit. I still think the Nidaime's technique will be piss easy for you to perform when you actually know what you're doing.**'

'*So, you made the water do that?*'

'**I just told you that I did.**'

'But…what were you trying to do?'

'**I'll tell you later…if it works.**'

'*Wait just a damn minute, Kurama! If what works? What are you doing?*'

No reply, and that was actually incredibly terrifying. Kurama was more the rub-things-in-your-face type. He did not have a cagey, uncooperative personality. Not really. Not anymore.

Kurama, you're really making me nervous here.

And no reply. Fuck. Naruto was rubbing off on him.

"Yo!"

Kakashi chose that unfortunate moment to pop in while Minato was staring into space, standing in water, and ignoring the blackened, steaming mess on the stove.

"Bad timing?"

"Now you show up!"

Minato threw up his hands. How did it make sense that four adults were living here and it was the child putting out fires?

Kakashi set down a bag he was carrying on the counter and wordlessly began rifling through the drawers until he found the ones full of patterned towels depicting colourful birds. He selected a mockingbird towel to soak up the water.

Feeling guilty when nothing was said, Minato sighed and joined his brother on his hands and knees, wiping down the soaked cupboards.

"I was going to make you soup." Kakashi spoke up cautiously after the worst of the mess on the floor was dried and he was gingerly approaching the still-smoking stove like one might a faulty explosive tag. "I got called away and…figured I'd pick up take-out for you to have when you woke up."

"Hmm."

It was a nice thought. Misguided, but nice.

Minato raised up on his tippy-toes to look over the wreckage seriously, while Kakashi dubiously poked at the charred elements.

"I think we might need a new stove."

"You may be right about that, pup."

"Wait, what did you get?" Minato reached over to dig into the bag and pulled out some containers packed with far too many meat products, a steaming container of rice, and vegetables. "Did you

go to the Akimichi's restaurant?"

"They were the only place open this early!" That was certainly true since the sun was just barely starting to rise.

Kakashi's cheeks may not have been visible, but Minato noticed the reddening of his Nii-san's ears indicating embarrassment.

"You left me alone?"

That was actually a surprise if it was true.

"Of course not." Kakashi's voice rose in pitch and Minato narrowed his eyes sharply. "I had some of my friends watch the place."

"Friends?" He finished setting out the vegetables and folded his arms sceptically.

"You don't think I have friends, pup?"

"Are your friends ANBU?"

"Not in ANBU," Kakashi said back and Minato was positive the following cough was intended to cover up the laughter.

Definitely a yes, which meant…

"So your friends were watching the house to make sure nothing happened while you were out, but they didn't think a housefire was a big deal?"

There was a long pause.

"…Yes…"

Translation: Somebody was in for a beating.

Now that the outrage had fled his system, Minato felt drained and rather ready to crawl back into bed. Dropping the stuff onto the counter, he ambled out of the room and threw himself onto the couch and buried in his face in a yellow cushion.

The couch shifted slightly.

"So, suiton jutsu?"

In his heart of hearts, Minato really should have expected Kakashi's genius to notice his method. Denials would make him look suspicious and confirming would…well, Minato was not exactly unfamiliar with the prodigy label.

Rolling over slightly, he rubbed his eyes and yawned, much to his annoyance.

"Yeah. I knew I needed to put the fire out so…I did. Didn't think a campfire jutsu would be that wet, though."

"They're not." There was a weight resting on his head and the sensation of fingers rubbing his scalp with gentle motions. "If you want to start learning, I'll help you. But promise me no more jutsu until I'm here to assist you."

Subterfuge was impossible here. Not that he wanted to lie, per se, but adhering to the schedule of someone else was not exactly practical when one was trying to save the world. On the other hand, forcing Kakashi to train might be very good for him.

"I promise, unless there is an emergency."

"Good." The fingers tangled in his hair almost tight enough to make him wince, but then they let go and Kakashi stepped back.

"Tsunade is supervising Mikoto's relocation to the Uchiha building and Shizune is on assignment."

Minato was unable to completely suppress his moue of surprise, which Kakashi must have taken in lieu of an actual question.

"I have a mission too, but not to worry. I have far more competent sitters available to take care of you."

"I'm fine on my own." Minato sat up and nodded pointedly to the kitchen that still smelled like burnt rubber. "Honestly."

"Humour me." A quick impression of lips pressed to his forehead. "I almost lost you, pup."

"But you didn't." Minato swallowed thickly, leaving the obvious unsaid. It was the Uchiha that had lost the most this time around.

Tears were no stranger, but trying to cope with Naruto

experiencing an undeserved loss and witnessing the devastation haunt Sasuke's face had been so incredibly painful.

The last thing he remembered was Kakashi carrying him home from the hospital yesterday morning. Considering that the sun was just peeking up outside, it had been at least another day that he had slept. And considering the state of mourning his friends were in, Minato knew that sleep should be the last thing on his mind.

"Not this time." Kakashi's tone was playful, but his eyes bore signs of the same wildness that tipped into desolation the day Rin's body came home in a scroll.

There would be no benefit to pressing the issue at this point. The only thing Minato could do was be patient and let time pass. Hopefully Kakashi would relax soon enough.

"Okay."

Sure enough, Kakashi's chakra felt just a little bit less frantic at his acquiescence. It was far from an ideal starting point, but not even Konoha was built in a day.

Bull, Pakkun, and Akino appeared less than a moment later in a puff of smoke. After exchanging quick greetings, Minato shuffled upstairs to clean up and get dressed.

He was just brushing his teeth when he felt Naruto's chakra approach at a rapid pace, fluctuating between calm and almost frantic. There was a limited pool of possibilities that could have caused that, but Minato was more than willing to lean toward emotional distress.

"Don't mess this up, Minato," Minato ordered his reflection. As an afterthought, he splashed a bit of water over his face. "Naruto needs you."

It took him a few minutes longer than it should have to dress in the expected black, high-collared mourning garb. Procrastination was illogical, but with his mood as sketchy as it was, Minato was willing to buy into a little self-delusion.

Finally caving to necessity, he returned downstairs to find Naruto and Kakashi actually sitting together on the couch with the ninken at their feet. The pair turned as he made himself known, Kakashi's eyes caught in the past and Naruto looking like he wanted to sink into the couch.

“Hey,” he greeted his friend lamely.

“Hey.” Naruto twisted the cushion and pasted a fake smile on his face that made Minato’s rebelling stomach feel just that much more uncomfortable.

“I wish I could stay, but I have to go,” Kakashi lied easily and far too convincingly. Then his nii-san deflected attention like the professional manipulator he was. “You look like you think Minato is going to bite you, Naruto.”

“I know he’s not!” Naruto shot back in a not entirely convincing tone of voice.

“Good, then. I’ll leave you two alone. Behave and have a nice visit. And no burning down the house!”

“I’ll leave that particular task to Oba-san and you.”

“It was just a test!” Kakashi scratched each dog’s ears thoroughly before standing. “You three are in charge of the rugrats.”

Alone with three dogs that would provide detailed reports on their conversation and everything else they did. Spies everywhere. Sheesh.

“And pup, I’ll be back as soon as I can. We’re going to the gathering after Fugaku’s funeral.”

He nodded sharply, while Naruto just balled his hands into fists and stared at the coffee table wordlessly.

“I’ll be ready.”

“Don’t let me down.” Kakashi gazed sternly at the trio of dogs.

“You got it, boss!” Akino woofed.

“We’ll watch over the puppies, Kakashi. You watch your back,” Pakkun replied seriously, attracting Minato’s notice.

What exactly was Kakashi up to that was concerning the pack? That was…a mission? ANBU could reactivate someone in certain situations, but what could possibly have brought this on?

Kakashi’s chakra signature vanished from the vicinity.

How are you? would be so impractical to ask. Or rather, it was obvious. But something else was awry that Minato could not quite put his finger on. But it had to be something big to cause Naruto to behave so out of character.

"There was a fire earlier?"

Huh? Oh!

"Yeah…Kakashi left a pot on the stove and I woke up to it completely on fire. I managed to put it out." Minato paused there, deciding that it was definitely not the time to mention overpowered e-rank jutsu. "Anyway, we're probably gonna need a new stove, but otherwise it's fine. Mostly."

"Well, could be worse, though, right?"

"Right," Minato agreed uneasily, trying to gauge Naruto's mood and not say the wrong thing. "But somehow I don't think you snuck out of your house this early without a good reason. What happened?"

Naruto was guarded and definitely unlike his usual self. And yes, he noticed there was still grief lurking in the shadows of this boy who was chewing on his fingernails, but there was a haunted sort of awareness too.

"I just kinda thought that Tou-san dying would be the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

Naruto's voice broke and Minato fought to keep a semi-confused, warm expression on his face. He didn't know if he managed it or not.

"And it's not!"

Naruto's anger was quite something to behold in its purity and intensity. Situations like this did not have easy answers like the kind that could be found in an instruction manual. And most people never knew the joys and sorrows that accompanied being a jinchuuriki.

But Naruto did. Naruto had to undergo all this because of a decision Minato had made.

"They told you about this, then?" Minato levelled a finger

at Naruto's abdomen carefully.

"Jiji told me," Naruto muttered, mouth twisted in fury. "Told me the Kyuubi never died. That it's inside of me. And—"

Naruto's eyes darted to Minato's stomach and the other boy flinched away when he looked him in the face. It hurt, but not as badly as it might have if Naruto looked accusing.

"I'm just like you," Minato acknowledged carefully. "Part of a bijuu is locked inside of me."

"But you're not a monster!" Naruto said, blue eyes radiating distress. "You're not evil. You're not! You're one of my best friends and you're always nice to everyone! Always! And you stick up for people! How can someone like you be a monster like—"

"Like you?"

Naruto fell quiet and he looked like someone suffering under a particularly potent genjutsu.

Minato shook his head. "You're not a monster, Naruto-kun."

Naruto remained silent in that trace-like state.

"Would Fugaku-san have died for a monster?"

Now that got a reaction. Naruto reared back and his lips curled in a soundless snarl.

"Would Mikoto-sama have adopted a monster?"

Naruto made a sound like a dying animal caught in a trap. It was a low mournful cry that Minato ached to relieve, but knew turning back now would do neither of them any favours.

"People are stupid, Naruto," Minato said in an almost self-deprecating manner. "Sometimes they try to make good decisions but can't foresee the outcome. And sometimes…" Minato paused and swallowed thickly. "People are wrong all the time, Naruto. And it's easier to be mean than it is to be kind. It's easier to hate a jinchuuriki because the bijuu isn't around anymore."

"I guess," Naruto muttered, looking glumly unconvinced.

Time to change tactics, then.

“Do you hate me, Naruto-kun?”

“No!” Naruto’s voice was rough with denial, cheeks darkened to an almost righteous shade of angry red.

“I’m glad,” Minato said faintly, “because you’re one of my best friends.” *And I love you very much.* “I would hate to lose you because of stupid people.”

“I just…how can you stand it? Jiji said you’ve known all along, but you haven’t treated anyone differently.”

The unspoken *you haven’t treated me differently* was rather obvious.

“Two big reasons.”

Minato held up one finger.

“First, I trust that my friends and my family aren’t like everyone else. I mean…you don’t really think Sasuke, Itachi, or your Kaa-san hate you, do you?”

Naruto shook his head. Minato took that as progress and held up another finger.

“And second, my bijuu did not ask for this either.”

“Huh?” Naruto straightened like he had been struck by lightning.

“Have you seen how people have cages for dogs and cats sometimes?” Minato asked carefully.

“Uh, yeah, I guess so,” Naruto replied at the same time Pakkun sniffed in a thoroughly put-out manner. “Disgusting practice.”

“You see,” Minato explained, “you and I are the cages. We might not have bars or locks, but that is what we are: prisons. Our bijuu are stuck inside us whether they like it or not.”

Minato lifted his shirt and channelled a touch of chakra to his abdomen. Obligingly, inky black lines popped into existence until his seal appeared on milky white skin. Naruto had hopped up from the couch and was poking at his own bare belly with a frown. It was reassuring to see the torment had transformed into curiosity; another reminder that, mentally, Naruto really was still quite young and his

mind had yet to be completely ruined by poor experiences.

"Put some chakra into your fingers like how you stick on the walls."

"Oh. Right!" Naruto chuckled sheepishly and gasped as his own intricate seal appeared on his belly.

"See, that is a prison that prevents your bijuu from getting out. And every time I see the seal, I remember that I'm not the only one stuck like this. I sometimes wonder how it feels for them to be trapped inside without being able to eat, play, or live like I can."

That sort of thinking was well beyond the selfish pursuits of children, but Naruto had never been ordinary. Incredibly, Minato could tell that Naruto was mulling over the concept instead of instantly arriving at a conclusion.

"That's actually…that kinda sucks."

"Are you glad that you know?"

"I guess so," Naruto said distractedly. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Your chakra was similar to mine. It's how I found you that day we met."

"What?"

Minato nodded sagely. "I hadn't been around people in a long time." Unless one counted Edo Tensei. "You felt like me, so…I guess I hoped you needed a friend too."

Suddenly, Minato found his arms full of a babbling, emotional Naruto. He took it in stride; offered a tissue, ignored the blubbering, and held on for dear life.

Someday, Naruto was going to wonder why he was made a jinchuuriki. Minato knew it would be a hard day, but hopefully he would be there to help Naruto sort through his feelings when it came. And if it changed Naruto's opinion of his *hero*, so be it.

"Naruto-kun, have you had breakfast? It's pretty early so… we could make something."

"Eh?"

Another mood swing. Well, that certainly was going to be wonderful for his nerves.

"Shizune keeps the pantry stocked so I'm sure I could make us something…as long as it doesn't need a stove to make it."

Naruto's stomach growled and the blond rubbed the back of his neck as he turned cherry-red from embarrassment.

Just like your Kaa-san.

"C'mon!" Naruto charged toward the kitchen, froze, spun around to grab Minato's arm, and hauled him into the kitchen. Minato just laughed and allowed himself to be manhandled toward the pantry.

"Don't forget us now!" The ninken padded into the room with noses in the air hopefully.

"Of course, of course."

"Naruto, pull out whatever looks good and we'll see what we have."

"You got it!"

Minato glared at the counter that was defiantly taller than he was. Yup, definite downside to being small. Withholding all his grumbling since he did not want to be a poor example for Naruto, Minato went and grabbed a chair from the living room to use as a stool and set about grabbing one of the kitchen knives.

Just as he was leaning over a cabbage to cut into it, Kurama called.

'I can sense Choumei's presence growing stronger. I hadn't expected that oversized beetle to do this. If he compromises us, I'm going to show him what it really means to squash a bug.'

Minato stumbled and nearly sliced a finger off.

'I'll deal with this. You go on making breakfast.'

"Minato-chan, you okay?"

"Err…yeah," Minato replied awkwardly. "I'm just worried

about everyone."

"Me too," Naruto said, "but Kaa-san is coming home for the funeral later today…We'll fix everyone then, right?"

"We'll do our best," Minato agreed grimly.

But who is going to fix me when you really understand the truth?

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Danzo bypassed the spluttering hospital receptionist with his Root shinobi silently shadowing him. Most shinobi—even Hiruzen's precious ANBU—would hesitate before impeding his process. Danzo's power was widely acknowledged as barely secondary to the Hokage so, as he reached the restricted floor, only a token resistance was offered. A neat gesture had his superiorly skilled subordinates neatly detaining the ANBU and allowing him to proceed in peace.

There were three doors that each held their own village secret, but Danzo ignored them all and instead walked to the end. He deactivated the security seals on the false wall. A moment later, the dead end shimmered out of existence, revealing a stairway that led below the surface of Konoha.

This particular stairwell was known to five individuals in Konoha: Danzo was one of the five. As for who had access to the room itself, that was another matter entirely.

Only a single door remained at the bottom of the steps. Security seals inscribed by Senju Tobirama himself remained in perfect functioning order. Danzo felt no fear as he touched the door knob and twisted. The sealing wards recognized Hashirama's chakra—diluted as it was—and allowed him to open the door as only a Hokage should be able to.

Danzo disliked surprises. It was a simple fact, one that caused him to extensively prepare for undesirable outcomes with a zeal that he drilled into each of his subordinates.

Therefore, it was a significantly more unpleasant surprise to
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discover the makeshift morgue occupied by more than just a corpse.

Standing above the head of Uchiha Fugaku was Hiruzen.

“I’ve been expecting you, old friend.”

“Have you?”

Dealing with Hiruzen had become increasingly trying over the years. Nearly all of Danzo’s proposals were brushed aside in favour of peaceful solutions that would inevitably require his Root shinobi to pick up the slack—that was, perform unsanctioned, covert operations. And now Danzo needed to expend precious effort to pacify Hiruzen.

Instead of answering, the Sandaime turned his back on him and addressed the wall. “You knew I was occupied with a meeting among the clan heads. And no doubt you verified that before coming here.”

All true, much to Danzo’s consternation, not that he would allow Hiruzen of all people to realize that.

“A clever decoy,” Danzo said dryly, “but explanations are hardly necessary. I’m sure you’re aware of why I’m here.”

“I know why you’re here,” the Sandaime agreed easily, with a dangerous glint in his eye that was not particularly frightening after years of familiarity. “But I’ll be honest with you, Danzo. I’m much more interested in how you obtained the ability to access this room. Not even Jiraiya could enter here without several days of working to dismantle the wards and even then—I wonder.”

What is your game this time, Hiruzen? Something is off about you today.

“I thought we had an agreement, Hiruzen.” Danzo chose his words with considerable care. Something was less diminished. Something that prickled his instincts. “I take care of the missions that must never be known by our people. And *you*, Hiruzen, don’t ask questions.”

Danzo watched the Hokage tap the body’s forehead with a finger.

“Was all of this because of the Sharingan?” Hiruzen asked,

the inflection in his voice sounding almost sad. How pathetic. To think the old fool sympathized with that den of traitors.

How *disappointing*.

"A corpse has no need for dojutsu." There was no need for pretences between the two of them. Not anymore. "And the Uchiha would have insisted the eyes be destroyed anyway. We can allow them that illusion and still keep another Sharingan at our disposal."

"You mean *your* disposal."

"Yes." Denial served no purpose, but the Sharingan would serve the village well beyond the death of their original host. Danzo would make certain of that.

Hiruzen sighed unhappily, placed one hand on each side of Fugaku's head, and looked straight into his eyes—Danzo nearly recoiled at the sharp scrutiny, the staggering amount of killing intent. This was out of character and rather uncomfortable.

"If you tell me the truth when I ask you my questions, I will give you the Sharingan."

Danzo did nothing to acknowledge the agreement, but he waited nevertheless. If a few questions would placate the other man, it was time well spent.

"What went through your head when you decided to have the Senju boy poisoned?"

"There was an error made. If the opportunity presented itself, the assassins were simply to administer the poison. The informant provided more poison than necessary to accomplish the task. And regardless, it was a success."

"Dare I ask?" Hiruzen snapped.

"Why ask questions to which you already know the answers?"

"Your curiosity almost lost us a national treasure, Danzo."

"And your refusal to disclose information may have cost us a more valuable asset: a second jinchuuriki."

"You are not the Hokage, no matter how much you may

wish it otherwise."

"And yet I'm the only one of us with the conviction to do what is necessary."

"Tell me how sabotaging our relationship with Kumo is the correct decision? Our relationship with Suna is fragile enough as it is. Allies, even for a brief time, are useful."

"Allying with Kumo will do nothing more than show the nations that we are weak enough to require a treaty with the most treacherous village of the Great Nations. Now, the story will be how the double-crossing shinobi of Kumogakure took part in sabotaging the treaty. And the ending that is remembered will be that one of Konoha's finest lost his life as a consequence. This outcome is the most acceptable, as well as the most salvageable."

"When did the value of life become so cheap to you?" Hiruzen sounded almost regretful and it did nothing but flood Danzo's body with disgust.

An interesting question.

"It's rather the opposite, Hiruzen," Danzo replied finally.

One after another, a history of deadly struggles crossed his mind. A Kawarimi that dragged him to safety while his Baku gored his opponent. A struggle to avoid the barrage of poisoned senbon the puppet masters of Suna pelted them with. Severing a man's head just before Danzo himself could be gutted. And most prominent of all, Danzo running away and leaving one of the most powerful men that had ever lived to face certain death.

Life was unfair. This world was kill or be killed. A genocide to derail an invasion. Killing one's own comrades. The needs of the many over the needs of the few.

"The worth of a life is valued by what it can provide to others. Such value is not so easily measured."

Hiruzen took out a bottle of sake from inside his robe, unscrewed the cap, and took two long gulps. Danzo accepted the bottle thrust in his direction, inspected it carefully, and took a long, measured swallow.

"I should have killed Orochimaru when I had the chance."

Hiruzen shifted next to him. “Most of my ANBU teams have reported back in with sightings several weeks old and little in the way of leads. You say I’ve become weak, and perhaps that is so.”

A fortunate weakness in many ways, for him. Orochimaru may be of a sadistic mindset, but the man had his uses.

“Do you regret anything you’ve done or something you failed to do, old friend?”

“Sentiment.” Danzo’s mouth twisted and he barely kept his tone even. “I expected better from you, Hiruzen. Regret is for those who have lost their resolve.”

“I’m disappointed, Danzo.”

Hiruzen’s voice matched the defeated slump in the man’s shoulders and the way his arms lay limply at his sides.

“An idealist to the end.”

“Take his eyes and get out.”

Given permission, Danzo stepped past Hiruzen, removed the jar with the false replacements plucked from a convict’s sockets. These were not the first eyes he had taken and they wouldn't be the last. The squishy sensation as he removed the first Sharingan was expected and as he proceeded with ease, Danzo heard the swish of robes—

Perhaps I’ve underestimated you after all.

Danzo’s lone eye rounded in horror. His fingers were in the final snake seal but his chakra network was completely disrupted.

Danzo was an S-ranked shinobi; with that rank came the ability to predict an ordinary opponent's moves and counter them with ease even without ninjutsu or genjutsu. Of course, there were exceptions to this.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was just such an exception.

Danzo flipped the table and launched himself backward. His chakra was not responding. There was something wrong, there was—

The chittering of a thousand birds. Danzo’s panicky thoughts were disrupted by a burning pain in his chest. Like every

victim of this particular jutsu, he looked down and felt almost proud of the lightning chakra humming around a visibly bloody hand.

"Hatake Kakashi…" Danzo moaned, his vision blurring as he lifted his face to meet Hiruzen's blank expression.

"I've made many mistakes that I've regretted, but none more than allowing Orochimaru to escape. And now this," Hiruzen drawled with none of his prior weakness. "What kind of Hokage would I be, if I did not protect my people from *you?* You believe I'm weak, Danzo, but the truth is, you've served your purpose. Now that you've slipped your leash, I have no more use for you."

Hiruzen had to be bluffing. Or perhaps this was one of Koharu's most terrifying genjutsu—the woman certainly had the mean streak for it.

But the voice whispering in his ear was damning evidence to the contrary.

"Don't fuck with my family."

Danzo swallowed and almost desperately sought Hiruzen out, finding a stranger with unsympathetic eyes that was all wrong. Oh so wrong.

I thought I was the darkness and you were the light, Hiruzen. How could I—

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Ironically enough, when Danzo had overturned the table, Fugaku's body had fallen to the ground. In death, Danzo was lifelessly lying side by side with the Uchiha patriarch. It seemed strangely fitting to Hiruzen that his victim would have the last laugh.

Without a word, Hiruzen snatched Fugaku's eye off the ground and dropped it into a nearby tray for Shizune to replace before the funeral later.

Kakashi wiped his hand on the cloth Jiraiya extended his way and tossed the bloody rag over Danzo's still body.

I only wish I were sorry, old friend. But here, at last, comes the end of our friendship. You and I have both had to assume many roles over
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the years, but your work is done now. Whatever life comes next, I hope you finally find some peace.

"I can't believe that woman's seal worked!" Jiraiya seemed genuinely flabbergasted.

"It was ingenious, really," Kakashi murmured. "The Ishida woman set the seal to activate after the eyes were tampered with. What I can't understand is how Danzo didn't feel the seal transfer."

"From what I can tell, this seal requires an organic base—hence, the eye was a perfect medium," Jiraiya explained with awe clinging to his words. "I'm guessing the limited delivery system and the fact that an enemy would have to willingly pick up a questionable item is why the seal never saw much action on the field. How on earth did you even know about it, Sensei?"

"Mito-sama described many of her techniques, but she shared very little with even the most studious of Konoha's people. Doing so would have been a betrayal of her clan's practices. But when I saw the compulsion design on Ebisu, I recognized the distinct Uzumaki style of sealing. That Ishida woman may not know it, but she may very well be better with seals than you, Jiraiya."

"I killed Danzo," Kakashi remarked faintly.

"How does that feel?" Jiraiya asked smugly.

"Well, I'm hungry."

"You've really got to work on that imagination, kid."

"Should we help oversee the relocation of Danzo's operatives?" Kakashi asked him.

"No. Shibi and Uchiha Daisuke are heading up the transfer to a holding facility with limited backup from Bear's squadron. While I've asked Shikaku to coordinate, I want the joint police force to be responsible for this effort. If we delegate that responsibility, it will be a massive demonstration of trust that will hopefully boost the Uchiha's morale during this difficult time."

"And Danzo's body?"

"Seal it."

Without a word, Jiraiya leaned over the body, went through a rapid series of signs, and placed a prepared sealing scroll overtop it. There was a glow from the paper and a crackling pop. Jiraiya stood up after the body disappeared and carefully avoided the pool of blood as he turned back toward the door.

"Got him. Shall we leave?"

Nodding once, Hiruzen turned to the staircase and began the long climb up.

"I'm almost disappointed that Danzo didn't realize that dropping the eye would have cancelled the sealing. If he had, perhaps things would have been different."

"I think he was too shocked that you actually attacked him." Jiraiya's voice was coloured with disbelief and a hint of accusation. "To be perfectly frank, I didn't expect you to go through with it. Even after you had me offer a clemency deal to that woman in exchange for her total cooperation, I expected you to change your mind. For all his flaws, Danzo was your *friend*."

"Not to interrupt," Kakashi interjected mirthlessly, "but I'm the one who did the killing."

"No offense, kid, but if Sensei had not come up with that plan, Danzo would have been a disaster to take down. The guy was no pushover, he just thought he knew Sensei and he was wrong."

A friend that had strayed from the path far too long ago. And Danzo had been right all along: Hiruzen had become too complacent. If he wanted to leave more than a pile of rubble for his chosen successor, there was much work to be done.

They exited the stairwell, noting the area was absent of Root and regular ANBU operatives. A few of the medical personnel shot questioning looks their way since it was impossible for anyone to miss the Hokage's robes, but no one approached the trio or stopped them.

"Kakashi, get Shizune and take her back down there. Fugaku's body needs to be repaired right away."

A gentle breeze later and Jiraiya was standing with him alone outside the hospital.

"Jiraiya, you're just as weak as I am when it comes to Orochimaru. If we're honest with ourselves, we've both been holding onto some fragmented hope that he's coming home."

"Something broke in him a long time ago, Sensei. And I'm done holding on to false hope. I know Orochimaru isn't coming back and I know that someday there will be a reckoning. I'm ready for it."

"Are you?" Hiruzen snorted, allowing his disbelief to seep into every syllable. The door had closed long ago for traitors: it was high time that he acted like it. "Orochimaru is *never* coming back. The only reason he could possibly return would be to exact some sort of revenge against the village. Or me. Aside from that, the only way Orochimaru will be coming back here is with his body sealed in a scroll. And if we're both being honest, Jiraiya, I know you lack the resolve to see that fight to the end. If Orochimaru opted to slither away, you would let him and be glad for it."

Hiruzen allowed Jiraiya's hand to land on his arm and stop him in his tracks. There was a wild, frightened look on Jiraiya's face that carved away at least a decade of age. Hiruzen had seen the look more times than he could count, so he allowed Jiraiya's hold and felt the other man shake with adrenalin-induced rage.

"That is one hell of an accusation!" Ah, there was the angry snarl Hiruzen had been anticipating since the disastrous festival.

"Because no matter how much I love Orochimaru, that does not change what he did to Konoha or our people. And I know now that I must do whatever it takes to rectify my actions. Do you *really* understand that?"

There was nothing to gain from this sort of debate. Shrugging off the slackening hold on his arm, Hiruzen suppressed the urge to rub the tender area and instead continued his sedate pace out of the hospital. Of course, Jiraiya wasted no time in catching up—showcasing how serious he was since the other man did not stop to ogle some of the fine nursing specimens on the way out of the building.

"Don't think this is over, old man. You and I need to talk."

Oh, goody. Not ominous at all with such a ridiculously oversized pool of topics available. Tsunade. The talk Hiruzen had with Naruto. And of course, that *other* matter that Hiruzen had decided on without Jiraiya's consent. But more than likely, the main topic of

concern would be Konoha's proactive approach to finding Orochimaru. This was promising to be another sleepless night.

But this was Konoha, the village that never seemed to catch a break when it came to freak incidents.

"We don't have time." The Sandaime deliberately paused, not wanting to be approached by any of the civilians at this point. "You and I have a meeting with Uchiha Itachi and his cousin Shisui. If all goes well, this meeting should be brief."

"But?" Jiraiya groaned.

"Two things, Jiraiya." Hiruzen kept a straight face, without even an ounce of leeway in body language or tone. "First, I need you to resume your spymaster's duties sooner than expected now that Danzo's information network will no longer be accessible."

"Something tells me I'm really not going to like this second bit."

"You may not decline this assignment, Jiraiya. I do not expect you to be happy with it, I expect you to comply and perform your duty to the best of your abilities."

"Just spit it out. The suspense is killing me, Sensei."

There was a great amount of pleasure gained from watching the colour fall away from Jiraiya's face.

"Very well, what I want is this…"

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"Okay, wait just a minute!" Shisui nudged his stiff-faced cousin in the side in a futile effort to muster some support. "You're making me Jiraiya-sama's apprentice? Is this some kind of joke?"

A quick glance to his left confirmed that the white-haired man was sitting on a chair, legs splayed, and scratching a few notes into a scroll.

"It was my idea, actually," Nara Shikaku murmured from the side where he stood with his arms folded. "You've been in
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contention for ANBU for some time, but that interest has gone up considerably since you were observed during your battle with a high-rank combatant."

"Not that I'm not honoured…" Shisui blinked at the Sannin, who had his nose buried in a sheaf of paperwork, and bit his lip uncomfortably. "Because Jiraiya-sama is...incredible and all. But I would have been fine with an ANBU induction."

"Shisui-kun, settle down and allow me to explain." The Sandaime gestured to a free chair. "Please."

"Of course." He nodded carefully, resolving to hold his temper and project some Uchiha formality. "My apologies for my outburst, Hokage-sama."

Shisui dragged Itachi into the seat next to him and tried not to sweat under the combined attention of the Hokage, the Jounin Commander, and the not-exactly-attentive Toad Sage.

"Itachi."

His cousin sat up straighter.

"Effective immediately, you are promoted to chunin. When Maito Gai is not on missions, I'm officially ordering you to continue taijutsu training under his supervision. Additionally, I will be taking you on as an official apprentice and will begin training you in all areas with the exception of taijutsu."

Once again, Shisui's entire world was blown out of the water and he knew—and didn't care—that he was staring slack-jawed and completely shocked at his cousin.

Hokage's apprentice. Apprenticeships to currently reigning Kage just were not the done thing. To have that sort of offer extended came with a lot of implications and made quite the statement to other clans.

"After four years, your apprenticeships should be nearing completion and you will both be inducted into ANBU," Shikaku said expressionlessly.

Shisui nudged Itachi again, trying to gain a sense of what his cousin was thinking, but the other boy was distant and unreadable.

“Shisui-kun,” the Sandaime said without inflection in his voice, “our information network would be absolutely crippled if something were to happen to Jiraiya. I am assigning you as his apprentice for a twofold purpose.”

There was an undercurrent of tension between the Sandaime and the Toad Sage. The latter had given up his work and met his questioning look with a solid stare tempered by years of experience in the field. Shisui felt a shiver race up his spine, but met the other man’s stare with a hard look of his own, refusing to back down.

“First...”

Shisui's head snapped toward the Sandaime.

“You will be learning everything Jiraiya can teach you about espionage, infiltration, and adapting your considerable talents to the creation and maintenance of a spy ring.”

“You want me to be a spymaster?” Shisui asked, scratching at his head slowly.

“That would be my main intent, but I have another purpose here.” The Sandaime had turned completely to Itachi and was looking at his cousin rather indulgently. “Itachi.”

“You intend for me to become the Godaime Hokage.”

“You are certainly my primary candidate.” The Sandaime looked at him like a hawk eyeing up a rabbit. “But the future is never a certainty. Jiraiya will ensure that Shisui is properly groomed to assume the role of spymaster, but in the event Itachi is not prepared to assume that role...”

Oh, no way. No fucking way! That was…definitely not what he had…ever thought about.

“Bullshit! This has got to be some kind of joke!”

The eyes of the entire room fell on him. Shikaku smirked. Jiraiya leered. Itachi pretended not to care—Itachi-speak for incoming silent treatment. And the Sandaime laughed.

“Not a joke.” Jiraiya stretched his massive arms and several joints popped. “Now that feels a lot better.”

“I’m not sure I have what it takes to be Hokage,” Shisui said, helplessly looking to where Itachi was stoic and far too accepting of this situation. “I mean, I’ll do my best, but…I’m just me.”

“At least this one is honest.” The Jounin Commander fixed that intense gaze on Itachi. “This one is a bit too quiet, yet.”

“You both are talented young men whose destinies are deeply intertwined with the future of Konoha. Shisui, you and Jiraiya will be leaving in three days.”

“That isn’t much time.” Itachi spoke offhandedly.

“I’ll be ready, Hokage-sama.” Shisui shifted, tense.

“Good.” The Sandaime looked ready to turn away, but paused and looked back. “How is your family doing, Itachi-kun?”

“As expected.”

Itachi replied with a blankness that just snapped something inside of Shisui.

Itachi was processing this far too calmly and burying his feelings like always. Maybe Fugaku was not such a dick in the end, but all Shisui could see right now was Itachi putting on a mask again.

Kumo was a nest of bastards and Fugaku had done the *honorable* thing, but at what price? What fucking price?

“Everyone is a mess,” Shisui hissed.

Itachi shot upright, surprise colouring his cheeks red.

“Shisui!” Itachi snapped warningly.

Shisui scoffed and shook his head. He smiled with his lips pulled back in a way that ferally bared his teeth.

“Mikoto-sama is burying her husband when she should still be in the hospital. Every single time I visit her, she looks like a zombie. She barely notices when anyone is there, even the kids. And Sasuke isn’t sleeping, barely eating, and refuses to talk to anybody.”

Itachi grabbed his wrist pleadingly.

Shisui shrugged it off. “And Naruto was weepy, but ever

since his little chat with you yesterday—" Shisui could not bring himself to feel pleased when the Sandaime's lips hardened. "A kid like that has no business being quiet."

Fugaku was dead, his family was falling apart, and they were being showered with glory. Were they actually deserving or was that an illusion too?

"You definitely aren't being pandered to, kid." Jiraiya had mysteriously appeared next to him and squeezed his shoulder tight enough for it to hurt.

Oh crap. Had he said that aloud? Goddammit, he had said that aloud.

"It's alright, Shisui-kun," the Sandaime said humorlessly. "I did ask how you were."

Jiraiya patted him gently. "It's nice to see you don't have a stick up your ass like so many Uchiha do. I'll see you in a few days, kid."

The door burst open and a short genin huffed and puffed while extending a message held in his hand. Shikaku snatched it, unrolled the contents, and mumbled something about "no end in sight to the paperwork disaster."

"Hokage-sama, you'll want to see this dispatch from Genma's team."

"Give it here."

Shisui stood there listening to the tick-tock of the clock and waiting for the other sandal to drop.

"Itachi. Shisui?"

"Hokage-sama?" "Sir?"

"You can leave now."

"Oh," Shisui muttered faintly. "Right."

On the way home, Shisui finally managed to string a few words together that made some sort of sense.

"What exactly just happened?"

Itachi quietly and succinctly stated the obvious: “Our lives just got fucked up.”

Shisui swatted a fly harassing his cheek and hummed lightly.

“So…since when do you swear?”

“Shisui.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

His day just kept getting weirder and weirder. How was this his life?

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Returning to Konoha with a foreign jinchuuriki in tow was rattling his nerves. Maybe it was for the best that the girl slept for the better part of the trip and only roused herself when they were two hours out from the village. Genma had volunteered to carry the seven-year old, who was far too light for his liking. When she finally woke up, he had immediately shoved a ration pack into her hands.

The ravenous kid had not objected to the flavour and had quietly listened to Genma chatter away. She had been reluctant to answer his questions at first, but after an hour, Fū—as he learned—had admitted to running away from Taki to find a better life.

Genma felt like that was an incomplete version of the truth, but he had not pushed for information. Not only was doing so going to destroy the tentative rapport he built with the girl, but he also already had a pretty good idea of what might make a jinchuuriki run away.

After that, Fū began to relax and offer more than monosyllabic answers. She spoke falteringly about stories she had read and confessed to bringing her most favourite books in her bag. Of course, the entire ANBU team had rummaged through her bag and had been appalled at the lack of contents. Nothing incriminating and all evidence supporting the runaway story—albeit a poorly equipped runaway with no extra food.

Genma knew immediately when he started familiarizing
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himself with the cadence of the girl's voice that he was royally fucked. Genma had a terrible time letting go once he became attached to someone and he had already run a dozen scenarios through his head for convincing the Hokage to allow him to keep her.

He leaned toward arguing that Taki was not equipped to challenge a stump and any armed confrontation would end up favouring Konoha, which was more or less true despite the several dozen reasons it was a horrible plan. Another part of him thought appealing to Danzo was clearly the way to go, except that evil fuck was even more twisted than Orochimaru.

Which brought him back to square one, with no particularly favourable options available to him.

Except Konoha had been astir with something akin to disaster. They had entered from one of the many secret entrances—not wanting to create rumours about a Konoha ANBU team returning with another village's jinchuuriki—and made for the Hokage tower over the rooftops.

Genma exchanged looks with his comrades, who had their lips pressed together into thin lines. Below them, a majority of Konoha's citizens were garbed in black. A little chakra to his ears picked up the conversations below, which were largely anti-Kumo in nature, with "Kumo dogs" being some of the choicest phrasing.

The Hokage's Tower had been strangely empty of personnel, but the Sandaime's secretary had ushered them into the office where Jiraiya of the Sannin, Nara Shikaku, and the Hokage himself were engaged in discussion.

Unlike all of his imagined no-win scenarios, the Hokage actually rolled his eyes after taking a look at Fū before demanding a summation of their mission. Genma had stared back defiantly when the Sandaime looked between him and the girl playing monkey on his back with a calculating twinkle in his eye that did nothing to reassure him.

After Raidou finished speaking, the Sandaime congratulated the entire team on a job well done—the underlying impression suggesting the old man was referring to Fū's presence—and asked Fū if she wanted to stay in Konoha. After the girl on his back choked out a "Yes!" the old man simply nodded, fished a scroll from his drawer, and tossed it.

Genma had caught it and felt his jaw opening and closing as the Hokage congratulated him on adopting a child. The old man went on to say he expected to see them in his office for a meeting first thing tomorrow, for paperwork as well as a more detailed *discussion*.

Translation: seal check, interrogation, and Kami knew what else.

Many aspects of the shinobi world were unfair, so Genma was somewhat overwhelmed with emotion when a payslip for five times the amount it should have been was handed to him along with a pointed look in Fū's direction.

With a pointed suggestion to all of them to seek out their colleagues for information about the incident, they all left.

Holy fuck. The Sandaime just gave me a jinchuuriki. Oh, fuck me. This is so far above my pay grade. Holy hell! That creeper Danzo is going to be all over my ass. Fuck my life!

Genma fished his keys out of his equipment pouch, flashing what he hoped was a reassuring grin to the girl nervously curling her fingers in the sleeve of his shirt.

Instead of addressing the nervous behaviour, Genma crowed victoriously as he pushed open the door to his—incredibly dusty but otherwise tidy—apartment and quickly ushered the small girl into his home.

"So!" Genma clapped his hands together, caught a whiff of his own less-than-stellar smell, and grimaced slightly. "I know it's kind of, well…It probably could use some colour around here, right?"

Genma unzipped his flak jacket and draped it over a peg by the door.

"I'm hungry, so I bet you are too, right, kiddo?"

"I could eat," Fū said quietly.

Genma watched the girl struggle out of the sandals that had most definitely been another colour originally, its soles nearly completely worn. Following his gut, Genma reached over and plucked them from her hands, turned around, and tossed them in the trash bin a few steps away.

“I’ll buy you a new pair along with some new clothes after we get cleaned up. And then we’ll have to eat out since…well, anything I still have in the house is definitely not safe unless you want to spend the next year in the bathroom.”

Genma had spent his fair share of time helping out youngsters in recent years and his own parents had abandoned him to an orphanage for reasons he didn't care to remember. The point was, he never forgot how it felt to have the world turn its back on you.

Fū had that look. That expression that plainly screamed that she was not coping very well and wanted so desperately to trust, but had forgotten how.

Most people would have pawned off a child with emotional problems to the nearest person.

Shiranui Genma was definitely not most people.

“How about I show you around?”

“Sure?”

“Great, I’ll give you the express tour, then!”

Genma invaded Fū’s space and lifted her far too skinny body up with no trouble. The girl flailed a bit and tensed while biting at her lower lip.

“Now, none of that! You might have an overpowered insect in your belly, but you’re still a kid so I’m gonna treat you like one. Got it?” Genma winked kindly, pleased when the adorable little squirt turned redder than a cherry. “There isn’t much to see, but…let’s take a gander, shall we?”

“Yes, please!” Fū replied more certainly, her head turning.

“This is our kitchen here. Once I stock it with groceries, you’re allowed to help yourself to anything you like, okay?”

Taking it as a positive sign when she just bobbed her head and continued to peer around, Genma carried her through the apartment. It was a quick enough tour anyway, with only his bedroom which had a few knickknacks and a distinct orange book that he kicked under his bed hurriedly when Fū pointed it out. The living room had a television set and a small bookshelf that Fū stared at long

enough for Genma to add another stop to their growing list of places to visit. The spare bedroom was a futon with bedding that had not been washed since the last time Raidou stayed over after drinking. That had been months ago; the room itself was no place for a kid.

"We'll get you some new bedding too. Maybe some curtains and a few other things to spruce this place up for you."

"You don't have to do that." Fū spoke in a rush. "This is perfectly fine."

Unsurprised by the outburst, Genma flicked the end of the girl's nose, causing her to let out a moue of protest and gape like a startled faun.

"This place is a shithole, brat," Genma declared matter-of-factly, rather enjoying how incredulous the stare directed at him was. "You're living with me now, so if I say you get new stuff, you get new stuff. Got it?"

"Got it." Fū still looked like she was ready for him to rip the rug out from under her—not that Genma could really blame the poor kid. Jinchuuriki had it rough and Fū looked like she had endured more than her share of disappointment. Not for the last time, Genma was relieved that at least Naruto had finally found a family in the Uchiha Clan.

"Alright, I bet you'd like to get cleaned up, right, Fū-chan?"

"Yes, please."

Genma dropped her just outside the bathroom where she stood uncertainly.

"Hold it, I'm gonna see what I have for you to change into."

Genma wasn't optimistic. Because, really, what did a twenty-one-year-old shinobi keep for kids? Biting his lip, Genma hesitated inside his room, but finally reached for a scroll that Gai had gifted him years ago for "In Case of a Youthful Emergency."

Genma was not exactly sure this qualified, but unless he wanted to leave Fū alone or take a naked seven-year-old girl into public, his options were limited.

Slamming his fist into the scroll, it glowed briefly before a

tiny messenger-sized turtle blinked up at him.

"Please ask Gai to bring clothing for a seven-year-old girl to Genma's house." The turtle was definitely giving him the stink eye! "Please?"

It vanished with a poof, hopefully to deliver the message.

Fū had moved from the bathroom entrance to the living area, her nose glued to an old romantic adventure novel that Aoba had given him a few years back as a joke. The book did not seem like such a joke tonight, what with its cover being reverently stroked like it was some tome of kinjutsu.

"If it's that interesting, you can keep it, alright?"

The girl jumped a foot in the air and clutched the book to her chest.

"Ready for that shower?"

"Yes, but…?" Fū was frowning at him with an intense look.

"But?"

He lowered himself to his knees so he was eye-level with the girl. Another trick Genma picked up sorting out Kotetsu and Izumo: kids responded better to someone on their own level.

"I just don't understand why you're being nice to me." Orange eyes stared him down fiercely. "Once people find out about Choumei, their eyes change. No one wants me around and I just—how do I know this is real?"

Ah, so you're testing me already? I guess I'm not surprised. Not really.

Choumei, though? I'll have to talk to you about that another day, if you'll let me.

Fū's voice broke and Genma held himself back from whispering words of comfort that would resound as less than truth. Reassurances were nothing but prettily packaged lies to those whose trust had been broken. Genma knew what it felt like, so he held back and answered as plainly as he could.

"You can't know."

“But how do I—”

“How do you know what to do?” Genma finished the question. He captured Fū’s hands between his and rubbed the back of her knuckles lightly with his thumbs. “It’s difficult because the answer is something you’ve taught yourself never to do. You have to decide whether you want to take a chance that something good is finally going to happen. I can’t make that choice for you, but I can tell you that I’ve been in your sandals, kiddo. Taking a chance on people isn’t easy after you’ve been burned a few times.”

No one spoke for a moment. Genma knew better than to get up. Walking away even for an innocuous reason could sabotage anything he gained with Fū by virtue of his honesty.

Finally, after several minutes of stillness that his muscles were protesting, his patience was rewarded.

“I think I’d like to be brave like you, Genma-san.”

Genma did not comment on how wet the kid’s eyes were, and he might have turned his head when he heard a sniffle, but he chucked the girl under the chin and stood up to stretch.

“Eh, none of that formal crap. We’re family now, right?”

“Family? We are?”

“That’s what adoption means. I think I’m too young to be a Tou-san, but I’d do alright as a Nii-san or something like that!”

Before he knew it, Genma had a green-haired octopus wound around him. Laughing good-naturedly, he ruffled her hair and pulled Fū into a brief hug before urging her toward the bathroom.

“Nii-san says to go wash. Because I think we both need it.”

“Your hair does need to be washed,” Fū agreed far too readily.

If she thought he smelled bad, he would just have to give her a stronger taste! Genma ripped off his bandana and tossed it at her, causing the girl to squeal and run for the bathroom.

“Into the shower! I’m not the only one smelling ripe!”

“Hai, Nii-chan!”

"Bah!"

Genma ran his fingers through the oily strands of his hair and grimaced. Yep, he could certainly use a good scrubbing too.

It took all of five minutes to clean himself up. Honestly, he longed to soak and let the pounding hot water ease the tension in his shoulders, but he did not want Fū to be left unattended. It was not that he didn't trust the girl, but they were still getting to know each other and it seemed far too great a risk to leave her to fend for herself. Or, Kami forbid, force her to contend with Gai on her own.

He had just managed to clothe himself in his spare uniform when a pounding on the door attracted his attention. So that cheeky little summon had not failed him; the only person that could make the house shake like a doton jutsu was Gai.

Hurrying to the door, he breathed a sigh of relief when the shower down the hallway continued to run. As he pulled it open, Genma braced himself for an exuberant embrace—

Only to find a much gentler, far weepier Gai—who was *not dressed in green*—wrapping his arms around him.

"Genma, it is such a relief that you're back!" Gai yelled in his ear with far less gusto than normal, but somehow it was worse since Genma just knew there were snot and tears getting his fresh clothing all wet again. "Our beloved comrade Ebisu is in custody!"

Wait. What?

"While it is expected he will be released soon, he feels incredibly dispirited after being unyouthfully tricked by the sealing mistress of Kiri."

Sealing mistress of Kiri? In custody? Wait just a damn minute…

"Gai, hold on!" Genma grabbed the sobbing man by the shoulders and shook him. "What happened? I know Ebisu is a bit of a different sort of guy, but he isn't the type to land himself in jail. What's going on?"

Genma listened patiently as Gai—in a very youthful, passionate way—explained how the village had been infiltrated, how Ebisu had somehow been coerced by a mind-control seal, and how Gai

had stopped him with help from his eternal rival. Genma had already been unsettled listening to the story, but he found himself floundering when Gai started weeping even louder about how Uchiha fucking Fugaku sacrificed himself for the village.

If it had been anyone else, Genma would have called bullshit, but this was Gai. Gai who was honest to a fault and would rather stab himself in the face than lie.

“So, let me get this straight.” Genma rubbed his head. “Ebisu is with Interrogation because he was mind-controlled, a Kumo shinobi was killed, and Uchiha Fugaku offered himself up to avert a war.”

“Yes!” Gai sobbed dramatically.

Konoha really did not need a war right now. It was not exactly common knowledge, but Konoha had lost a significant portion of its upper-division jounin ranks when the Kyuubi hit. It had only been four years, so an armed conflict may not have ended in their favour.

“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but we all owe him one.”

“Yes.” Gai sobered, staring down at his feet. “I have not been able to see Itachi yet since I have been trying to be supportive of Ebisu, but I’m sure his youthful spirit needs lifting."

Ah, hell, Genma had forgotten that Gai had recently taken a shine to the Uchiha heir.

The worst part of this was, Genma knew that Gai was hoping Genma could visit Ebisu in order to give him a chance to find Itachi.

The shower shut off, reminding Genma of exactly why he could not go hang out in the bowels of T&I.

“Genma?”

“Hey, Gai, did your turtle pass on my message, by any chance?”

“Oh, indeed it did!” Gai pulled a bag out of nowhere and handed it to Genma. “Although it was quite a challenge to pick out such foreign clothing! But I have prevailed even if it did not quite

make sense to me!”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Genma crowed as he ran to the bathroom door. “Kid, I got clothes for you.”

The door opened a crack and a single amber eye peeked at him.

“Here!” Genma thrust the bag at the door and a tanned hand nimbly dragged it inside before shutting the door with a decisive bang.

“Genma?”

Gai looked more cautious than before, a painfully uncertain twist to his lips.

“I suppose the timing could be better, but let’s just say that my mission did not go exactly as planned.”

When it came to Gai, a direct approach was necessary—unless a certain masked sadist wanted to lead Gai around on a merry mental chase.

“The Hokage let me adopt a kid. Her name is Fū.”

Genma waited a moment, lazily fished a camera out from under the couch, and snapped a picture of a raisin-faced Gai.

“That’s gonna look awesome on the fridge!”

“You have a daughter?” Gai said, looking flabbergasted for another full second before he leapt up and nearly destroyed his end table with a sweeping kick.

“Genma-san has agreed to be my Nii-san!”

Gai froze and Genma thanked his assassin’s instincts for not choking; instead, he quite calmly snapped another picture before facing the window and sniggering into his fist.

Sweet Kami. Gai’s really done it this time.

Gai had obviously gone to the stores to find the personification of springtime for girls. Or youth. Something of that disturbing ilk.

Fū was wearing a sleeveless kunoichi dress in the same green that Gai himself favoured with matching green shorts and an orange belt that was the same shade as Fū's eyes. He had included a pair of sandals in a practical shade of black that seemed to fit decently. But there was also a giant, oversized black headband with a giant orange flower pinned on it that bounced as Fū swayed forward.

"Thank you for the dress, Gai-san! I love it!"

Oh fuck.

Genma snapped a picture for posterity's sake before fleeing to the kitchen. There should still be a bottle of stronger stuff stashed away if no one broke into his place while he was gone.

"Yosh! I am pleased you like it, my youthful young friend! Do you desire to become a kunoichi? If so, I would be more than happy to stoke the fires of your youth!"

Genma ignored the horror show going on in his living room and poured himself a healthy cup of sake.

"Youth? Is that a training technique?" Fū asked like a little lamb on her way to the slaughter—enthusiastically too.

"YOSH! I can see that you will truly be a disciple of hard work!" Gai boomed in rapturous delight that spawned on the rare occasions people stuck around for longer than five seconds. "Allow me to explain!"

Fuck it. Genma drank directly from the bottle.

Seriously, fuck my life.

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Minato stopped just shy of the Memorial Stone, nearly jumping out of his skin when the back of each of his legs was butted from behind by something cold and moist.

"When Nii-san said you were coming with me, I have to admit I didn't quite expect this level of paranoia," Minato muttered, one part exasperation and another irritation.

Silently, Bull lumbered past him to plop down next to the
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Memorial Stone with his tongue lolling out of his mouth in a deceptively carefree manner.

"Sorry!" Akino's ginger head poked around his leg while his snout lifted to scent the air. "All clear!"

"Yeah…" Minato shook his head. "I can sense that we're alone."

Well, mostly.

"Don't get moody, pup." Pakkun around Minato, stretched, and made a desperate scramble to climb onto Bull's enormous head. "You're lucky he only sent three of us. It's barely been a few days and you're still recovering from your ordeal. And you know how much Kakashi worries."

"Is that why Tenzo is skulking in the trees like a creeper?"

There was a shout, the sound of branches snapping, and suddenly silence.

"I guess those senses of yours really are strong," Pakkun remarked lazily, though Minato noticed the canine did not bother denying the accusation either.

"Fine, fine." Minato waved his hands. "But can you guys give me some breathing room?"

The three canines exchanged looks and there was even a series of grunts and whines before a consensus was reached.

"Alright, but we're going to be right over there." Pakkun huffed. The ninken barely reacted to Bull's uneven pacing, not showing the slightest sign of falling off.

"And no funny business!" Akino scratched a spot just behind his pointed ear. "We're watching you!"

Mother hens. Dogs were just a big bunch of overprotective mother hens. Minato was starting to think that the ninken were almost worse than Kakashi.

They had escorted Naruto home before coming here. The blond had been sad to go and even more reserved when he realized he would be dressing for a funeral that would culminate in his final

goodbye to Fugaku.

Stepping up to the Memorial Stone, Minato took a shaky breath. So many more names had been added since Minato had last taken time to be here. While he could never explain a visit to the grave itself, the name carved on this stone would suffice. Minato could finally say the things he needed to say.

Minato's fingers traced the fresh engraving of Fugaku's name on the monument.

"I think Naruto understands why you did it. But you've introduced hate into the hearts of both Naruto and Sasuke…I'm not sure you can appreciate fully what you've done."

As a jinchuuriki, Naruto would need to confront that hatred someday and release it. What was already an uphill climb had become a little bit harder. Of course, if Minato and Kurama could successfully reason with the other half within Naruto, that might change things drastically.

And Sasuke. Minato had been resurrected into a world by an Uchiha prepared to unleash revenge for the wrongdoings of Konoha once before already. He would be damned if he allowed his friend to walk the path of vengeance yet again.

"I promise I will do everything I can for your sons. Because, they *both* really are your children."

You died for them. And you died for Konoha. I really do know what your heart was feeling, Fugaku.

Casually, Minato pressed a finger into the stone and concentrated just a trickle of chakra into a seal. The effect would last only a few minutes, but no one would be able to hear him during.

Minato easily found the name he was looking for and knelt before the monument.

"I wonder if you remember these."

Minato slid a bright red carnation he had brought from the garden and laid it in front of the stone.

"I bought you a bouquet of these once because they reminded me of how beautiful your hair was."

Minato felt his eyes burn and he fisted his hands in the grass.

"You called it our red thread of fate, Kushina. I've never forgotten that. Just like I'll never forget you."

Could Kushina even hear him from wherever she was? Maybe, maybe not; Minato supposed the answer did not really matter. This moment was for him.

"But I'm not the same anymore, either. I've changed and I'm still changing."

The wind swept upward, tugging at the end of his ponytail and roaring in his ears along with echoes of birdsong.

"I have new friends that I care about."

Hinata. Naruto. Sasuke. And even the others: Shikamaru, Shino, Chouji, Ino, Neji, and Kiba.

"Old friends that have become more."

Kakashi showing off his overprotective, loving side. Tsunade rallying to recover.

"And…you'd never believe me about this last one anyway, but let's just say your furry friend is my best friend now."

Kurama.

"I'll always watch out for Naruto, though. You wouldn't believe how much those Uzumaki genes shine. He has your laugh, your smile, and your strength of spirit, Kushina. All of the best parts of you. As much as I wish it otherwise, I'm not his father. I'm his friend. And I will give my life to protect him, but I can only do it as a friend."

Minato stood and bowed to the memorial.

"Namikaze Minato is dead. I'm Senju Minato and…I have to figure out who that is."

The wind almost seemed to tug sharply on his hair and Minato laughed once, wiping a tear from his eye.

"I'll never forget you. And I'll always love you."

Finally, he turned his face away from the monument and spoke to the grey clouds in the sky that threatened to burst with rain.

"As for you, Obito...I'll be coming for you."

Minato rose, brushed the grass off his black pants, and started walking back toward the huddle of pups that all lifted their heads as he approached. Grinning, he paused as he felt a slither of chakra making its way toward them.

"Company?" Pakkun asked.

"Yes." Minato turned and pointed to the place he felt Shizune waiting.

Shizune had been a trooper over the past few days. When things got tough, the woman kept going and refused to be pinned down. Minato certainly admired her tenacity.

"It's time?" Minato ran up to where Shizune was watching him with a peaceful look on her face.

"It is." Shizune bowed respectfully toward the ninken. "Thank you for watching over Nato-kun."

"The boy is pack," Pakkun said gruffly. "Thanks are unnecessary."

"Let's go home, then. I'll get you boys some nice bones too."

"Oho, you're certainly a keeper, Shizune-san!" Akino cooed, prancing about like an excited puppy.

Even mighty Bull looked pleased. His tail thumped the air harshly.

"Let's go, then."

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Orochimaru used the sleeve of his coat to wipe away the worst of the blood and ichor off his cheek. A dozen paces away from where he was standing, the massive construct housing his partner was rolling in his direction.
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Orochimaru glowered pensively at the severed arm lying abandoned in the dirt as it was pecked over by a pair of particularly bold crows. The hand had been unwillingly surrendered by an Aburame ANBU member. Not more than ten paces beyond the limb were the Aburame's charred remains.

It came as no real surprise that Sensei would make sporadic efforts to obtain intel on Konoha's number-one missing-nin. Mistakes were rare occurrences, particularly with Orochimaru's level of paranoia, but he was hardly infallible. He couldn't always outrun his enemies.

But this quaint little group was a lot more resilient than typical reconnaissance teams. They had been prepared for him to engage them and reacted defensively before orchestrating an impressive tactical strategy that would have been effective against someone of A-rank caliber.

Such a shame. They really had picked the wrong sort of opponent.

Oh, the ANBU team had put up a terrific fight—as much as mice can when they unwisely attract the attention of a pair of predators. In the end, though, the Nara kunoichi took it upon herself to sacrifice herself and ensure the Uchiha and Hyuuga escaped. The Hyuuga was not long for this world, however, as he had more than a few of Sasori's senbon sticking out of his flesh, but it was an awful shame about the Uchiha…

There were more than a few experiments
that Orochimaru was dying to conduct on a live specimen like that…

Never mind that. What could the purpose of Sensei's little stunt be? As a missing-nin, there was no real surprise in having Konoha pursue him, but Orochimaru was dissatisfied with the lack of information at present. Something about this entire situation did not fit.

Why was Sensei being so bold after so many years? To his knowledge, nothing should have changed the situation, but obviously something *had* changed.

But what? What could have forced that old fool's hand?

Something interesting was afoot. Something…worthy of attention. Perhaps acquiring a bit of information into current affairs

was worth his time.

"Orochimaru, my patience with you is wearing thin. You are going to make us *late,"* Sasori said in deadly tones as Hiruko's tail loomed over his head.

Sasori enjoyed these intimidation tactics even if Orochimaru was not one to play along. While it was tiresome, Orochimaru knew it was necessary.

For now.

"I would imagine the opportunity to add a few more bodies to your army would be appealing, Sasori."

"You know as well as I do that Konoha ANBU personnel utilize specialized suicide measures as a last resort." The puppet's tail lifted menacingly. "The only thing this skirmish has accomplished is to delay our mission in Tani. Let's go."

"So touchy. I almost fear you resent my company, Sasori."

Kicking over a piece of the Nara's immolated remains, Orochimaru sighed and looked toward the forest. Now was not the time to arrange an encounter, but oh, how he yearned to track down the fleeing shinobi and rip their eyeballs from their sockets.

"Orochimaru, let's go."

Orochimaru rolled his eyes and tipped his head to accentuate his serpentine jaw.

"I suppose so."

Later, he would have to acquire some information. Perhaps trading a favour to Sasori would be worth it to make use of the man's impressive spy ring. Regardless, Konoha had piqued his interest once more.

After all, it was not every day an old man learned to grow a pair.

"Sasori, has anything *interesting* been whispered about lately?"

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Fugaku's funeral had been a clan-only affair mostly for the sake of Mikoto, who would not be capable of performing in front of a large audience.

The reception, however, was another matter entirely. The Uchiha Clan was hosting a rather ostentatious event despite the condition of the widow. Tsunade had mentioned more than once that she intended to crack a few skulls when she discovered who was behind it. Nevertheless, their little family would be going to this shindig—and Shizune had singed the cover of one of Kakashi's books with a legitimate fireplace iron when his Nii-san had moved a bit too slowly.

Minato hadn't seen the man move that fast in…ever.

East of the Uchiha District, Minato felt the sporadic pulses of a chakra signature that, although unique, was in the same flavour as Kurama's chakra. Even without having laid eyes on her, Minato felt positive that sunny personality had to be Choumei's jinchuuriki.

"Oba-san, will Mikoto-san be alright?" Minato piped up in an attempt to distract Tsunade from her foul mood.

"She'll be much better after I deal with those bumbling fools."

So much for that distraction. He tried.

"That's what happens when shinobi retire, Minato. They have nothing better to do except meddle in the affairs of others."

"You would know," Kakashi remarked slyly, because the man obviously had a death wish.

Shizune choked and stumbled into Jiraiya, who looked far too happy to have his hands treacherously close to Shizune's backside. Tsunade's fist glowed briefly with intent and Kakashi wisely replaced himself with someone's mailbox just before the wood post shattered and the metal box was sent flying until it was just a speck in the sky.

Minato acted quickly and forced himself to *stumble*. Deliberately, he trampled Jiraiya's toes, which caused the large man to jerk backward. Seizing the opportunity, he planted his elbow in his
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so-called "goods."

Jiraiya yowled and his grabby fingers retreated before they could grope Shizune, promptly eliminating Tsunade's interest in Kakashi. She now had a juicier target for her wrath.

"Jiraiya! What the hell are you up to?!"

It worked like a charm. Tsunade had hands on either side of Jiraiya's head and was shaking the giant of a man with the ease one might fling about a doll. Kakashi nodded once in approval and Shizune was fretting up a storm next to Tsunade about not making it on time—which was a ridiculous argument since they were already in the district itself.

"I'm going to find Sasuke and Naruto," Minato announced casually.

"Hmm, fine. I'll catch you later, pup."

Minato rolled his eyes, not believing Kakashi's innocent ploy for a moment. Obviously Kakashi knew that Shisui and Itachi were in the vicinity and trusted them to babysit him too. How Kakashi was aware of that would have to remain a mystery.

Minato bypassed the front yard milling with people. Most overlooked him for his youth and height, but a few more cunning schemers thought to approach him after taking a closer look at him. Minato used his height to his advantage and avoided everyone while winding himself around back to an area of the Naka River that bordered the Uchiha District itself.

Ducking behind a few round shrubs, he finally made it around back, where he saw most of his friends dressed in soul-sucking black at the edge of a particularly turbulent patch of water. Shisui and Itachi were standing just far enough off to the side that they could not readily be considered part of the group of children.

It was Sasuke standing in the middle of the river's uneven surface, holding a dark bokken and performing beginner's stances for kenjutsu upon the water, that caught his eye. From a distance, Minato could tell that Sasuke's chakra reserves were nearly depleted and each swing of the wooden sword was more sluggish than the last.

It was hard to say what exactly was going through Sasuke's head, but Sasuke's chakra and mind had to be at war with each other.

With so little chakra left and so much of it going into keeping him atop the water, he had to be exhausted.

But there was a noticeable lack of turmoil that left a mark on Sasuke's chakra. He was missing something.

Shisui turned as he approached, a smile blooming upon his face as he pumped his arm in a wave and whispered into Itachi's ear. Shisui was at his side in a flash, his arms embracing him gently.

Minato returned the gesture and, after a second, he was put back on his feet.

"Missed you, kid."

"You too."

A second later he was released—only to be swarmed by the other children, who made a packed semi-circle in front of him.

"Minato-kun!"

There was a blur of dark hair from his periphery before he was impacted by Hinata latching on and clinging to him almost desperately. The girl's dark attire was slightly damp, as was her hair, suggesting she had braved the water's surface to be near Sasuke. No one else looked damp, but no one else—at least to his knowledge—had the chakra control necessary to achieve this result.

"Sasuke-kun isn't cooperating, I take it?"

Minato patted her back, sensing her limited chakra reserves spluttering weakly. At least she had the good sense to stop while she was ahead.

"Sasuke-kun is not himself," Hinata snapped back in harsh defense. "I certainly wasn't after…well, you know."

"Breathe," he ordered patiently.

"I'm glad you're alright." Hinata sniffed, but the tears never fell. "The last few days have been dreadful."

Carefully freeing himself from Hinata's grasp, Minato greeted everyone.

"It's nice to see you guys again."

"You too, Minato-chan." Chouji was fiddling with the seal on his bag of chips, but they were noticeably unopened. "Glad you're okay now."

"I told you guys he was fine." A bit of Inuzuka cockiness made an appearance, coming almost as a relief after everything that had happened.

"Your basis for that assumption was not substantiated by evidence, therefore we could only conclude you were making assumptions based on a faulty premise," Aburame Shino stated calmly, causing more than a few kids to look confused.

"Um…huh?"

"He said you're an idiot," Neji translated for the majority of the children.

"We already knew that," Ino stated blandly.

"Hey!"

"All of you need to shut up," Shikamaru growled, startling nearly all the youngsters into complacency. "Look, Minato, we're all glad you're okay, but funerals are depressing and Sasuke is acting weird. And if Chouji doesn't start eating, I'm not gonna be able to nap."

Sweet Kami, did the Nara have frighteningly one-track minds.

"Shikamaru!" Ino nailed the other boy in the head. "His Tou-san died! If that happened to me, I would be so sad."

"Yeah, well, we've been here for almost thirty minutes watching Sasuke on the river." Shikamaru pointed to where Naruto was literally hopping up and down screaming at Sasuke from the riverbank while Itachi held him back with a restraining arm.

"I'll try to get him. Do you guys want to grab some stuff from the house so we can have a picnic?"

"Oh yeah! We can do that!" Ino looked so happy to be of help that it was rather endearing.

"Yeah, everyone is bringing food so we should be able to

grab some stuff easy-peasy." Kiba held out his hand in a peace sign.

"I'll make sure we get enough," Chouji added.

"Sasuke hasn't been eating much, so we'll make sure to bring lots of stuff." Hinata had a strange glint in her eye—sort of fiercely determined and almost protective.

Neji just sighed, but moved to stand near Hinata with Shino trailing behind them.

"Will you guys save me some dumplings?"

To his embarrassment, his stomach growled enthusiastically.

"Sure thing," Into chirped with a slow, exaggerated wink. "Sounds like you're starving too, Minato-kun."

"Meh, I'll just wait for you guys here."

Collectively, everyone—including Shisui—intelligently drew away from the resident Nara genius.

"Gah!"

"That's what you get for being a bum!" Ino screamed.

She kicked him again, causing the boy to roll to his feet while nursing the goose egg on his head and ambling toward the house.

"Thanks, guys!"

"Itachi is worried about Sasuke," Shisui confided as they walked together slowly to where Itachi was standing near Naruto.

"Itachi is going to go grey early." It was a fair assumption considering how forcefully controlled Itachi could be.

Minato would never forget the jaded, angry Sasuke from the future. The young man that had bargained with Orochimaru for the chance of finding an answer that would not lead to vengeance. The cycle of hatred was not such an easy thing to navigate, even once the mind knew it was there. Ignorance was bliss and knowledge was the bane of existence.

No matter what, Minato would not allow Sasuke to become that hurt, betrayed person ever again. Maybe it would be impossible to eradicate the seeds of repulsion toward Kumo, but not everything was ruined. Sasuke's love for his father was great, but it was not that unfettered rage that led to Madara's ascension to power.

This was wholly different.

"He hasn't said a word," Itachi stated, looking visibly unhappy.

Minato knew the last remnant of Itachi's childhood had died along with Fugaku. Uchiha Itachi had been destined for greatness before his birth and now would carry a dozen more burdens. Considering the vengeful young man that Sasuke had become in the future, Minato knew that he would have to watch this one carefully. A young mind was malleable and intelligence was not the same as wisdom. Itachi had listened to the whisperings of Danzo and that had brought his family to ruin. Minato could not allow that to happen again.

Would not allow that to happen again.

"You worry over Sasuke too much." Minato spoke at last, feeling reluctantly pleased that Itachi seemed to be attentive and distressingly aware that no one had yet turned on Minato. "Everyone grieves in a different way. Even you. But you're always hovering over Sasuke instead of walking next to him. If you want to help Sasuke, stop over-thinking it. Just be there for him. The rest will sort itself out."

Minato did not stick around to watch Itachi try and dissect him with that uncannily discerning gaze. Instead, he took a deep breath, carefully regulated his chakra flow, and stepped onto the river. Whatever Kurama was doing was definitely impacting his chakra control, but the impact was infinitesimally small—a ripple on a pond—so he was able to compensate for the moment.

The river burbled over the rocks and saturated the air with a pleasant mist that cooled his warm skin. Sasuke was standing dead in the middle of the river with his bokken almost slack, one swift current away from being swept off.

"I did it."

A loaded statement if there ever was one.

“Did what?”

“Took me over two days…but I got it down.”

“A…kata?” Minato asked hesitantly.

“The water-walking technique,” Sasuke muttered, just on the edge of brusque, but there was an element of pride infused in his voice. “I promised Tou-san I would keep making him proud. And I will.”

Minato sighed once, feeling his heart lighten a bit.

“Will you show me the kata you learned one more time? I haven't gotten to see you and Naruto doing them yet.”

It was the opposite of what most would do, but Minato had learned many lessons through trial and error with Kakashi. When you nudged a grieving child in a direction they didn't want to go or told them something they did not want to hear, it pushed them away instead of bringing them closer. If Minato wanted Sasuke to learn something, he would have to gently guide him in such a way that Sasuke never realized he was being led.

“Sure. Watch.”

Sasuke took up a guard position followed by a lateral swing. Each movement was overcompensated with excessive force—no doubt brought on by imminent chakra exhaustion—and on top of that, the manoeuvre was clumsy, but still recognizable. All in all, a good beginner’s effort.

Sasuke was panting, but there was a gleam in his eye that Minato had been expecting and looking for. Sasuke swung again. And again. Harder and slower.

Minato waited. And waited. He never said a word.

After a couple minutes, Sasuke stumbled and his chakra gave out.

Minato slid his arms under Sasuke’s armpits. Sasuke was much heavier than he looked so he decided to just drag the other boy back to shore.

“I fell.”

“Your body is just tired. Like mine was.”

“Tou-san would have done better.”

“Hardly.” Minato grinned, thinking back on that very day. “Hyuuga Hiashi was on the same team as Fugaku-sama. They learned how to walk on water *after* making genin. And Hiashi beat him and rubbed his nose in it for weeks! Made your Tou-san crazy! But no way, Sasuke-kun. You’re doing amazing.”

“I couldn’t save him, though.”

“Not your job,” Minato replied firmly.

“I hate them. I hate Kumo.”

“Then live well. What better vengeance is there than remembering your promise to your father?”

Sasuke seemed to ponder that for a second.

“…Maybe, but I’m still going to make the Raikage pay for what he did someday.”

Not a worst-case scenario. And while Sasuke was angry, his chakra did not scream of that twisted hatred from the future. Despising an enemy was not all that surprising; it was how the person handled it that really mattered.

“Here we are. Come on!”

“Sasuke!” Naruto pounced on the other boy at the edge of the shore and pointed to a large, colourful quilt their friends were sitting on with heaping plates full of food. “Everyone’s here now. You need to eat before you pass out. Like seriously, Kaa-san doesn’t need to worry about us too.”

Clearly, Naruto bringing up their only living parent and suggesting she was not exactly coping perfectly was the right thing to say because Sasuke did not once complain as he was dragged over to the quilt.

He sniggered into his palm and made to follow, only to be stopped by Itachi’s solemn voice.

“I never heard my Tou-san tell that story before.”

Shit. Desperate times certainly call for desperate measures. Jiraiya-sensei's rules for bullshitting your way out of trouble: Deny everything or create false leads.

"That's weird," Minato fabricated casually. He shrugged both his shoulders and smiled disarmingly. "Hiashi-sama was rather fond of that story."

"The context would suggest that." Itachi had backed off from suspicion, but he was frowning at the river and looked rather conflicted.

"Join us when you're ready, Itachi-san."

Minato trotted over to the picnic table, giving thanks to Hinata as she offered him a plate already piled with some of his preferred foods.

"Quit napping or I'm dumping the pork onto your head—you remember what happened last time."

Shikamaru actually inched away from Ino a bit and Chouji began muttering barely sensible apologies into his plate.

"Alright, no napping," Shikamaru muttered, looking more like he was surrendering instead of agreeing as he waved his hands at Ino urgently. "Tch, you sound like my Kaa-san. Quit nagging."

"Ino!" Minato successfully captured Ino's attention, carefully noting how the platinum blonde's left eye twitched dangerously. "I just wanted to say thank you for organizing the food and…the flowers look really nice inside. Did you help?"

The truth was he had not seen the inside so there was no telling whether any flowers were present, but he could hardly believe a funeral with Yamanaka attendees would be free of any blooms.

"I did!" Ino brightened, apparently having forgotten Shikamaru's unfortunate remark. "I told Kaa-san that I wanted to make it really nice for my friends so I worked really hard!"

"Oh, well, they do look nice," Naruto chimed in uncertainly. "I hope they cheer Kaa-san up."

Sasuke looked far less lost and almost a bit interested in what was going on around him. He went so far as to start shuffling

toward the group of friends that instantly surrounded him.

"Come get something to eat, Sasuke." Chouji dumped a second mound of dumplings onto Sasuke's plate. "You look hungry and that's making me worried which makes *me* hungry."

"I guess I could eat a little more…" Sasuke admitted hesitantly.

Leave it to the Nara to pull the ace they needed. Oh well.

"Dude, no offense, but you kinda smell. How long has it been since you bathed?" Kiba had a hand in front of his wrinkled nose.

"Yeah, it's been a while." Naruto reappeared with arms full of a dessert tray. "I brought us some goodies."

"Cinnamon buns!" Hinata snatched the tray away from Naruto, plopped down at their table, and sat directly in front of the sweet-smelling pastries. "Here, Sasuke."

Sasuke himself plunked down on a bench and frowned at the pastry on his plate.

"Not much of a sweets person," he muttered.

"I am." Shisui popped in and snagged the cinnamon bun off of Sasuke's plate—somehow oblivious to the killer intent pouring off the Hyuuga heiress.

Minato thought he heard Neji directing Shino to "back away slowly," but they were sitting the furthest away.

"Tou-san would like this," Sasuke said abruptly, causing the chatter—and Hinata's rage—to dissipate.

"The food?" Kiba continued to chew with his mouth open. A small octopus leg dangled between his lips.

"No. He would have liked us being here together."

Minato sensed the genuine goodness in those words and relaxed infinitesimally. The future was looking brighter already.

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It was a sweltering afternoon that necessitated all the doors and windows to be open to allow for a fresh breeze.

The Uchiha Clan home was overflowing with well over a hundred people. Representatives from all prominent clans were in attendance, in addition to dozens of Uchiha mourners and certain members of the Civilian Council that were making an appearance for the sake of politics.

Fugaku would have approved of this. Mikoto could practically hear his voice whispering to her even now, telling her what a triumph it was that their clan's prominence was being recognized; musing over potential marriage contracts for Itachi that Mikoto would have to squash before they became reality. Fugaku would have been proud, like dying was some sort of achievement instead of a tragedy.

Mikoto hated it. She wanted to take those smarmy politicians that reeked of overpriced perfumes and smash their painted faces into the dirt. And she wanted to go back in time and smack some sense into her late husband too. And if there truly was no other way, she would have been proud to take his place just so she wouldn't have to feel this lonely. Mikoto would not wish this sort of pain on her worst enemy.

A hand on her shoulder had her automatically struggling to muster up some sort of false thanks.

"Easy, Mikoto." She sagged in relief and felt the woman pat her shoulder in a gesture of commiseration. "It's been an hour. I'm going to reposition you a bit. Just relax and let my strength do the rest."

Relaxation was the last thing on her mind, but Mikoto forced her muscles to unclench and surrendered herself to Tsunade's care. It was a simple repositioning, but it removed the pressure on her body. Tsunade rearranged the pillows in a brisk manner.

It was over in less than a few moments and Mikoto felt only a few twinges of pain that were quickly dealt with by Tsunade's glowing green palms.

"Better?"

"Very much so, thank you," Mikoto mumbled before

absently pointing to the open spot next to her that no one had quite dared to take.

"Here." Tsunade flopped down and pressed something cool into her hands. "It will taste like shit, but it has some essential ingredients."

Medication and probably something more discreet to help her relax.

"If one more person comes up to me, I might kill them," Mikoto admitted while taking a careful sip of her drink.

Kami, it was foul. It was also a reminder of exactly why she ditched the hospital in her more reckless days. If only today was like those days were.

"Welcome to my world."

Mikoto frowned slightly at Tsunade's last comment, finding something a little off about the subtle jibe that she did not quite understand. To the few that dared approach them, the Senju woman warned them off with a glare that would make the most intrepid of souls piss their pants in fear. For what discernible reason was Tsunade staying with her? There was a new respect between the two of them since Tsunade saved her life, but that made them amicable, not friends.

"You're stuck with this one."

Mikoto's jaw clicked as the venerable Kami of Shinobi himself graced her with his presence. Around them, onlookers inched closer like the curious gossips they all were. Privacy was an illusion and she certainly would not be afforded any courtesy at all while she grieved.

"Hokage-sama." Mikoto greeted the man with a dip of her chin.

The Hokage's demeanour was dominated by regret. Understandably, he took the only remaining free seat next to Mikoto and stirred a cup of tea without drinking it.

"Again, I wish to extend my condolences on this saddest of occasions. Your husband was the sort of man all shinobi aspire to be."

“If they aspire to be dead men, then I’m sure that is the case.”

The Hokage hummed once and seemed to overlook her less than appropriate response. It would surely get her into trouble with upstart clan elders at a later time.

“I’ve taken your son on as my apprentice.”

The buzz of conversation around them abruptly dropped off as the eavesdroppers received the pound of flesh they had been waiting for.

“And I’ve officially reinstated you as a kunoichi of Konoha.”

What the hell? The bit about Itachi was all but expected considering the state of their agreement and Fugaku’s death, but a reinstatement? Outside of a request or wartimes, such an action was unheard of. Gauging from the flurry of whispers, the news of this would carry and it would carry fast.

Next to her, Tsunade seemed just as bewildered by this news as she was. What sort of meddling was this?

“Sensei, she has enough on her plate as it is. Active duty is not about to do her any favours.”

“I wonder about that. Grief is a funny thing, Tsunade.” The Sandaime was staring intensely at Tsunade for a minute and Mikoto felt like an entire conversation was happening between them, especially when the other woman suddenly looked away as if unable to bear the weight of that gaze.

“Naturally, you’ll need time to recover and train, so I’ll give you paid leave for the time being.”

“Hokage-sama…” She scrambled to find the words that would not paint her the fool and found herself grasping at straws. “My boys are—”

“Mikoto.” The Hokage’s face was smiling, but there was something hard in his voice that she was reluctant to combat. “I’ll have Koharu stop by to brief you on your new position next week. Rest, relax, and don’t give it any thought. I have no doubt the position will suit you.”

“As you command.” Mikoto let her chin drop in deference as she seethed inwardly.

“I’ll leave you ladies to relax.” The Sandaime stood and casually moved to mingle with some of the other guests. Around them, conversation restarted.

“Bastard.”

Tsunade snorted and Mikoto felt her cheeks flush with shame when she realized what she had just said was bordering on treasonous. Fortunately for her, everyone was so busy tittering with idle chatter and trying to fawn over the Hokage, they didn't appear to have overheard her.

“He certainly can be.”

It was not as if Tsunade understood what she was going through. Except that was wrong, wasn’t it? The Sannin did not have much privacy considering their celebrity status, so it was common knowledge that Tsunade-hime had been involved with a young man during the Second Shinobi War.

Tsunade *did* know what she was going through. The man she loved had also died an unfair death.

“How did you get through this?” Mikoto blurted out suddenly. Thankfully, she was quiet enough that those standing nearby didn't notice.

Tsunade’s smile was utterly mirthless. She downed her entire drink in a single go.

“You don’t,” Tsunade murmured. “You just find reasons to keep breathing. And eventually, *maybe*, a reason to enjoy living again. You’re luckier than I was. You already have a reason. Three, in fact.”

Oh, her poor boys. Mikoto really had not been the best parent in the last few days. If she were being completely honest, she only recalled seeing the children in passing if at all. She could not remember holding them or helping them.

Had they even been hurt? Or was it just her?

“Are they—” Mikoto’s voice broke somewhat. “Are they alright?”

“Hmm?”

“My boys…are they doing alright?”

She did not want to say it. She did not want to say that she had blocked out her children and focused on herself like some horrible, selfish person. What kind of person—let alone a mother—was she to have to ask someone else about her children?

“I took the liberty of arranging sessions with Inoichi for Sasuke. I think it would have been more difficult if Itachi had not intervened and made Sasuke cooperate.”

Mikoto felt her eyelids sink closed in shame.

“Naruto?”

“Hanging in there. The Sandaime had a talk with him yesterday.”

That hit Mikoto like a punch to the face.

“About…*it?”* she stressed.

“Yes, but he’s coming around. Minato seems to have helped him. In fact, Minato is out in the garden trying to pull Sasuke out of his shell.”

That was a comfort, actually. Mikoto did not know why, but the Senju heir seemed to have a way with people and the other children that defied understanding. If there was someone who could help Sasuke, she believed Minato was just the one.

Kami knows I haven’t been around. I might be injured, but… there is no excuse for this.

The sound of a crying baby dragged her from her guilt. Mikoto only just managed to put her arms around Hiashi’s daughter as the bundle was unceremoniously shoved at her.

Her injuries protested, but Tsunade was instantly at her side, fluffing pillows to help support the weight of the squirming babe she now held.

“What are you doing, Hyuuga?” Mikoto hissed, instantly sorry when Hanabi screeched in protest.

Hiashi was attired completely in black and had dropped onto the cushion next to her and closed his eyes.

"You offered to help me with my daughter." Hiashi shrugged, somehow not dislodging a single hair even though he was slouched against the couch like a Nara.

"You suppose *this* is a good time?" Tsunade asked with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

"Yes," Hiashi remarked defiantly. "I can think of no better time."

Tsunade looked prepared to say something rude, but Mikoto just shook her head and blinked tiredly at the baby innocently cooing up at her.

Absently, she trailed a finger over Hanabi's soft cheek. Hanabi just blinked blurry eyes, entirely uninterested in and unaware of the solemn affair going on around her. Leaning over, Mikoto buried her nose in downy black hair and felt her heart ease as the baby cooed at her some more.

Such a carefree innocence that was not tainted yet by their world. No war or hardship to worry about even though her family might be less than perfect.

Her eyes burned as she looked at baby Hanabi.

Was this what you saw, my love?

The baby cooed again and Mikoto held her as tight as she dared, just soaking in that innocence that was like a balm to her aching heart.

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dishes filled everyone up nicely.

Minato had suggested they take Shisui for an early lunch before he departed with Jiraiya. While Shisui's departure was not comparable with Fugaku's death, it was another loss in a short time span; the boys were displeased by the lack of notice.

"I can't believe you're leaving! The funeral was just yesterday!"

Minato swallowed a mouthful of noodles as Naruto complained to Shisui for the umpteenth time that day.

"Jiraiya-sensei is going to teach me some things that are important for me to learn."

"As if that'll help a moron like you," Sasuke retorted with all of his Tou-san's arrogance. "*Itachi* is going to be trained by the Sandaime. You'll never catch up to him."

"You're such a prickly little fellow!" Shisui cooed.

A second later, Sasuke snorted up a noodle as Shisui stuck a chopstick in the uppity boy's ear.

Minato snorted into his bowl as he observed the two engaging in a chopstick duel that involved the occasional flung vegetable, Sasuke's enraged growls, and Shisui's sniggering.

"You guys sure are a lively bunch." Teuchi chuckled from behind the counter. "You're all good kids."

"Thank you, Teuchi-san." Minato spoke on behalf of everyone except Itachi, who offered a quiet, polite thank you from a few stools over.

"You're welcome, kid. I better go get that miso going. I know Naruto is going to want a couple of those in a few minutes."

"You bet! Keep 'em coming!"

The ramen stand owner waved his ladle in a salute and returned to stirring.

"I still don't see why Shisui has to go." Naruto was so downcast and dismayed that he had slowed his ramen consumption to half his usual speed. "Minato, what did your Oba-san say about that

old coot?"

Well, that rather depended. On any given day, Jiraiya was referred to in any number of derogatory fashions. The content—or lack thereof—of Jiraiya's literary works was denigrated on a daily basis. Tsunade also consistently called Jiraiya "that lecherous bastard" and a number of other less savoury terms.

"Erm..."

Minato looked to Itachi for a bail-out. The dark-haired boy looked entirely unimpressed, but nevertheless shoved a mostly empty bowl of ramen away and made a slight *ahem* sound that attracted Naruto's attention like honey attracts bees.

"Tsunade-sama's opinion is irrelevant, Naruto," Itachi explained. "Jiraiya has what many would deem an eccentric personality, but that hardly makes him an unfit teacher. Jiraiya-sama is the one that taught the Yondaime Hokage so I would not underestimate him as a teacher. I imagine Shisui will have much to learn from him."

"He taught the Yondaime?!"

Minato held his breath as Naruto's face exploded in a dozen different expressions before settling finally on a challenging smirk.

"You better train your ass off, Shisui!" Naruto erupted then, untidily ending the chopstick war with his antics.

"Naruto-kun, language!" Minato admonished Naruto without any hope of exerting a real impact.

Sure enough, the blond slammed his hand onto the counter, causing all the bowls to rattle. Itachi used his quick reflexes to rescue innocent condiment containers from an untimely demise.

"Because Sasuke and I are going to kick your ass when you get back!"

Shisui burst out laughing and started rubbing a rough noogie into a squirming Naruto's head.

"It's a challenge, kid!"

"As if a gumhead like you poses an actual challenge,"

Sasuke snarled, all huffy and puffy with his hair looking wilder than usual after being manhandled.

"Least they left me out of this," Minato muttered thankfully.

Your head is in the clouds, kid. Sharpen up. You've got company coming.

Huh?

There was no need for Kurama to elaborate, though. A chakra signature that resembled a small star was weaving its way toward them in the company of one other that felt familiar, but Minato could not quite—

The tent flap ruffled and two shadows passed underneath.

"Ichiraku-san, you got any ramen left?"

Genma!

The bandana-wearing, senbon-chewing tokujo looked a little older, but otherwise completely unchanged from when Minato last saw him. That deceptively relaxed stance and those eyes that had definitely inspected the group of them twice over in the last two seconds were achingly familiar.

"Ah, Shiranui-san! Good to see you're back in the village again. And the charming young lady next to you?"

The girl beside him had exotic-looking features. Pale orange eyes soaked in the sights as if she could not quite make sense of what she was seeing. Her hair looked like some of the seagrass that grew along the shores of Uzushio.

Choumei's container stood out in an easily identifiable manner that looked nothing like a common Taki shinobi, nor someone from any other village.

And her clothing stood out for other, rather frightening reasons.

"I'm Fū!" the girl declared with a wide smile that was infectious just for how sincere and enthusiastic it was. "Shiranui Fū!"

"Any relation of Genma's is welcome here." Teuchi pointed to one of the few empty stools, which happened to be next to Itachi.

“Take a seat and look over the menu. Your first bowl is on me! Pick whatever you like!”

“Thank you!”

“Genma-san, you made it just in time to say goodbye!”

Shisui moved to engage the tokujo in conversation, freeing Minato up to shoot a quick clarifying question at Kurama.

Does she know about Naruto and I?

No. That girl isn’t a sensor and Choumei’s relationship with her is still at an early stage. They seem to have a positive relationship, but it’s too soon for that sort of disclosure.

Minato smiled as the girl nervously asked Itachi for his opinion on the menu and, in doing so, coaxed the stoic boy into conversation. It was a strange pair: one bright and enthusiastic, if cautious, and the other quiet, intellectual, and unassuming.

Odd indeed, but maybe Itachi could make a friend on the eve of his best friend’s departure.

Of course, Naruto looked up from his ramen binge-eating and noticed the colour in Fū’s clothing. Thus, he instantly became friends for life with the slowly relaxing girl.

Conversation flowed easily in the end. Gradually, Fū started speaking to all of them in turn and Genma was reintroduced to Minato under his new identity. Everyone took to the tokujo—even Sasuke, who was drawn in by the down-to-earth personality and easy smile of one of Konoha’s finest assassins.

Somehow, this good-natured introduction led to all of them accompanying Shisui to the gate, where a not insignificant group of people had gathered.

The Sandaime stood out as the most prominent figure, flanked by Koharu and Shikaku. Minato frowned at the obvious missing presences of Homura and Danzo, but dismissed the concern for a later day.

Tsunade was standing with Shizune, looking somewhat conflicted as her apprentice spoke to her quietly. Jiraiya was chatting with a masked ANBU—oh. Right. Tenzo. And yep, his former sensei

was rather indiscreetly passing a thick envelope to the ANBU and patting the slump-shouldered man's back once. Tenzo promptly fled the area afterward.

Minato quickly moved in and wrapped his arms around Shisui's waist.

"Thank you for your kindness, Shisui-san."

A hand tugged on his ponytail once and cradled the back of his neck for a single second.

"Take care of yourself, little silver. And look after these two eggheads for me!"

A chorus of denials sounded. Minato promptly extracted himself from that situation and gave the boys some time to say goodbye privately.

Minato intended to make his way to Tsunade, but he paused next to Fū instead, who looked tense and uncomfortable as if she was not quite sure what to do with herself at present.

"It was nice meeting you, Fū-san." Minato's address caused her to startle slightly, but she brightened again almost instantly. "We didn't have much time to talk, but feel free to come around whenever. I have a feeling we have more in common than you know."

Genma shot him a piercing look that Minato ignored. He just focused on Fū and evaded the tokujo's attention.

"I would like that!" Fū smiled so widely and hopefully at Genma that the older man seemed to melt under her attention.

"As touching as all of this is, it's time for us to leave. C'mon, Uchiha. Say your goodbyes. I want to be in Otafuku Gai by sundown."

"Because I'm sure it's all for the sake of practicality," Minato caught Tsunade muttering.

Some things never change.

Minato drifted over to where Tsunade was and allowed himself to be hefted onto the Sannin's hip.

"You're going to miss him," he whispered quietly enough

for only Tsunade's ears.

"No." She surprised him by how calm and sincere she sounded. "Jiraiya was never meant to stay in the village. He might tolerate it, but he wouldn't be himself. That's the thing about people, my little one. Living and thriving are not quite the same thing. You'll understand better when you're older."

I guess you can teach an old dog a few new tricks.

"Goodbye, Hime," Jiraiya leered from the safety beyond the gate. "When I return, I just know you'll be even sexier than ever! Go on a date with me when I get back, won't you?"

"In your dreams, you old perv."

Tsunade sounded irate, but her heartbeat remained steady save for a minute fluttering. Maybe Oba-san enjoyed Jiraiya's attention more than she let on. If it was true, that information was best kept to himself, unless he intended to bring down upon himself a world of misery and pain.

Minato rested his head on Tsunade's shoulder and watched Shisui exchange goodbyes with Naruto and Sasuke, who were suspiciously rubbing reddened noses into their sleeves.

Shisui broke away and moved to stand by Jiraiya with a mighty thumbs-up.

"Bye, everyone! Thanks for coming to see me off! You guys take care now!"

"You better come back with some new moves, Gumhead!" Naruto cupped his hands and shouted, "And don't forget presents! And send letters! And Itachi's snacks!"

"Naruto-kun." Itachi shook his head despairingly.

"Shisui and Jiraiya. That's an interesting pair."

Strong, thin arms plucked him from Tsunade's grasp and replanted him atop familiar bony shoulders. He buried his fingers in grey spikes and felt Kakashi's hands squeeze just a bit around his ankles.

"You're late," Minato commented nonchalantly.

"Just a bit. There were a few things I had to take care of, but I came as soon as I could."

That reply had been less evasive and ultimately made Minato more than a little curious. Still, he could hardly ask questions, even though he was dying for the answers.

"Shizune has been busy too. I'm going to have a word with Sensei tomorrow about stealing my subordinates."

"Hmm, we ready to go?"

"Hmph. Minato could use a bit of extra rest. Let's get going," Tsunade agreed while making it sound like it had been her idea all along, then stomped off in the direction of their home.

"I'm fine," he protested.

"You're fine when I say you're fine." Tsunade shut down his attempt at coercion and Minato slumped forward, admitting defeat. Kakashi squeezed his ankle again and Minato clung to the idea that it was a sign of solidarity.

"Off we go, then," Minato's transport commented as he began walking forward at a sedate pace—minus his favourite reading material, what with Tsunade in such close proximity.

"Minato-chan, you're leaving?" Naruto cried out from behind.

"Ah, sorry, Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun." He waved to them, grateful that Kakashi paused to allow him a brief farewell. "We'll visit tomorrow, okay? And you really ought to come around with Shiranui-san sometime, Fū-san!"

"Bye!" the orange-eyed girl called cheerily. "And I will as long as Genma brings me!"

Sasuke's goodbye was silent, but he lifted his hand to wave in a mirror image of his Nii-san.

"Oh, wait!" Naruto looked positively giddy, just as Minato detected an approaching chakra signature travelling at an incredibly fast pace. "Should we meet at the—"

"ETERNAL RIVAL!"

There was a green blur that never quite solidified as Kakashi executed a shunshin worthy of the ANBU captain he was. They reappeared several rooftops away, moving at speeds that truly challenged even Konoha's Green Beast.

Unexpectedly, Minato found himself laughing.

There was so much to do if they wanted to change the bleak future awaiting them. So much growing, but that fear could not reach him with the wind whipping his hair around and his body firmly attached to Kakashi's shoulders.

Minato looked upon the rocky faces of Konoha's Hokage and nodded once. The past could not be changed, but the present was just waiting to be fixed. The future was already irrevocably altered and it was up to him to keep things from unravelling the way they had before.

And if he truly wanted to start living this life as if it was his own, he really needed to start treating it as such. To start accepting who he was.

"Nii-san, what was Tou-san like?"

Kakashi faltered. A slight misstep that he felt when Kakashi's gait was interrupted for a split second.

"That isn't…the easiest thing to answer. What do you want to know? I can't promise I'll be able to answer, but I'll do my best."

Minato snuggled closer, ignoring the telling scent of blood and focusing on strands of hair that smelled like fresh leaves and sweat. It was comforting even if Kakashi's chakra felt queasy with fear.

"Doesn't matter," he remarked softly. "Tell me about spending time with him. Tell me whatever you want. I just want to see him the way *you* do. Not what some dusty history book tells us."

"Hatake Sakumo was his name. And as much as you do resemble the Nidaime, you remind me of our Tou-san very much."

"I do?" This part he was certainly interested in.

"You do," Kakashi said easily. "Let me tell you how my Tou-san taught me to swim. It was a rather unorthodox method even

by shinobi standards. You see…"

Kakashi's pace slowed and his words began to flow with greater confidence with each passing moment. Sure enough, Kakashi actually began emoting during certain parts of his story and engaging with his past instead of running from it.

While Kakashi was experiencing his own catharsis, Minato asked simple questions—nothing that would link to Sakumo's suicide—and actually found himself adapting to the idea that he had an actual history now. It was not just a farce created by Tobirama's jutsu, but a true and real experience that he was able to reflect upon as an entirely new person with a rich and unique background.

Genetically speaking, Minato had parents, though he would never meet them. And with those parents, came stories that now belonged to him.

Who am I?

An annoying brat named Minato. The rest hardly matters.

So much for trying to be existential. Thanks a lot, Kurama.

Kakashi continued to speak, imparting a dozen positive memories that seemed incredibly raw for something so long in the past. Minato continued to listen, stared into the sunset, and smiled faintly.

The next few years were sure to prove interesting.

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"Danzo is dead? Who could have done that?"

"The Hokage is responsible. No matter how paranoid Danzo became, he never would have suspected his friend. This changes everything."

"Hahaha, Tobi won't like that."

"Tobi's expectations are irrelevant. Madara will be
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displeased if his orders have not been carried out when we resurrect him."

"Eh?! So what do we do, then?"

"We wait."

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the wait on this chapter. It couldn't be helped. I have a life and my beta reader has a life and...lives can plot against you!

A fun announcement!~ We are having our timeskip to the Academy! That period will consist of 2-4 chapters depending on how inspired I am. After that, we're aiming for graduation. That being said, if you have a request, this is your one time to ask. I won't promise anyone anything, but I'll consider anything you have to say. The only thing I will tell you is that Sakura will show up. And obviously Minato will get plenty of screen time. But if you have a request for a specific pov or something fun, you're welcome to ask. I obviously can't do everything, but I'll see what I can come up with.

For the record. They are kids, so no dirty stuff! Just putting that out there!

Anyway, I adore each and every one of you. I really, really do. I hope that my erratic schedule hasn't put you all off the story! Take care!

Chapter 15: A Fresh Start

Chapter Notes

Note: Timeskip to 8 Years

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minato stirred with the dawn. Across the hall, he could sense Tsunade's presence in a deep sleep that would not be shaken without outside intervention. Shizune had not stirred either, so there was no sense in getting up yet. Not in any particular rush, Minato rolled over, hugged his pillow, and froze when he heard the soft murmur of another person's breathing barely an inch away.

Minato cracked open an eye and felt his stuttering heart restart. It was just Kakashi. His brother was sprawled across the other half of Minato's bed—the room in Tsunade's house—with dust and a smattering of grasses and pollen on his rumpled clothing.

He's asleep, concealing his chakra signature from us, breaking and entering all at the same time. Not sure if I should be impressed or disturbed.

Let's go with…eccentric.

Before leaving, Jiraiya had bought out the two homes next to Kakashi's property—much to the Copy-nin's annoyance—and dumped a significant portion of cash into Tenzo's hands. The ANBU had demolished the existing properties and set to work crafting an impressive domain worthy of the Shodai Hokage's granddaughter. And what Tenzo couldn't craft, Tsunade bought with funds Jiraiya sent her periodically.

At long last, the Senju compound existed again, albeit in a new location and downsized.

Since Tsunade was running the hospital and Kakashi was a full-time jounin—with occasional off-the-books missions—they did the only sensible thing: they shared custody. If Kakashi was on a mission, Minato stayed with Tsunade. When Kakashi returned, Minato would go back to staying with Kakashi. And with the close living arrangements, he could eat dinner wherever it suited him.

From time to time, Shizune rescued Minato and herself

from Kakashi and Tsunade's verbal warfare and stupid arguments. If not with Shizune, Minato was with his friends in the Uchiha District.

Tenzo—if that was a legitimate name for the man—had become a frequent visitor to Tsunade's residence after Shizune and him bonded over their love of exotic teas. There were half a dozen "accidental" encounters between the pair before Tsunade had interceded and dragged the horrified ANBU to a bar. While technically Minato was not present to witness the ensuing events, Kakashi had been all too pleased to recite the tale of Tenzo matching Tsunade in a drinking contest. Apparently, the duo had commiserated over their drinks since Tenzo became a frequent visitor to the Senju table for meals.

Minato shifted and moved to get up, but hesitated when he noticed that Kakashi hadn't so much as twitched. That was…odd, to say the least.

"Kashi?" Minato murmured worriedly.

Kakashi slept on, curled on his side and dead to the world.

I don't think he was trying to hide from you, Minato. He isn't making any conscious effort to suppress his chakra. I think his chakra just isn't there.

"What?" Minato gasped aloud.

Scrambling across the bed, he hovered uncertainly next to Kakashi and became increasingly alarmed when he placed a cool hand on Kakashi's forehead. His brother did not stir, nor did he lash out aggressively as could be expected when startling a sleeping shinobi.

Rubbing his hands together, Minato's palm glowed a subtle green. Not a healing technique, but a diagnostic jutsu that Shizune coached him on after reminding him that *every* shinobi should be able to use it in conjunction with first-aid techniques to prevent further injuring wounded comrades.

While running the diagnostic, Minato focused his senses and felt almost at a loss to explain what was happening. Kurama was right, of course. Kakashi's chakra was not suppressed, but it felt like a guttering flame that was on the edge of being snuffed out completely.

The diagnostic jutsu confirmed more of the same. Kakashi's chakra coils were almost entirely spent and there was still a steady

drain on his reserves: a constant, greedy consumption of chakra as it was produced, seemingly crippling Kakashi.

I told you the Sharingan was a curse.

So not the time, Kurama!

Minato bit his lip, but did not bother refuting it. How could he? The truth was the truth. Obito's gift was wreaking havoc on Kakashi's system like a leech that never consumed enough to satisfy itself. What to do about it, though…

The drain of a dojutsu in a foreign body was not a unique problem, but Minato had not been paying attention to how much of a problem it was. It was a damn hindrance and Minato could not believe he hadn't noticed sooner.

In four years, how many times have you seen him worse than this?

Minato thought on it.

Just the once, but he was black and blue from head to toe after that mission two years ago. Tsunade kept him in the hospital for almost a month, but I never considered the Sharingan's role in Kakashi ending up there.

Kakashi is a lazy bastard, but he's incredibly skilled. This implies that you have seen him exhausted, but largely uninjured. In this case, it looks like Kakashi's body gave out on him. Honestly, he needs help.

Right. Kakashi needed help.

"Oba-san!"

In half a second, Tsunade was barging through the doorway with her fist raised and glowing. It took another half a second for Tsunade to switch gears from battle-ready warrior princess to calm and collected medic. Without further delay, Tsunade was on Kakashi's other side, running her own diagnostic jutsu with a rather pinched expression.

Shizune stumbled into the room soon after, swearing, in a hastily tied robe with a kunai between her teeth. Behind her, Tenzo appeared in fiery red boxer shorts, dual-wielding a kunai and a tanto.

“Sempai?!” Tenzo exclaimed loudly.

“Chakra exhaustion, right?” Minato asked quietly.

“As much as you bitch and moan, my little one, I knew that you were listening during our lessons together. Just like I absolutely know that you’re going to master a few healing techniques before you graduate.”

Only Tsunade could make approval sound so snotty. And even if his heart sank at hearing the not-so-subtle proclamation, Minato knew better than to talk back. This was doubly important considering Tsunade’s “sleep-in” time had been prematurely disrupted and heads tended to implode one way or another whenever that happened.

“Is Kakashi-san alright?” Shizune asked carefully.

“Tch, this idiot should have gone to the hospital.”

Minato felt his heart falter in dismay.

“His body has been strained by the requirements of that implanted eye. On the surface, his chakra levels have diminished to a frightening degree, but it's clear that Hatake’s body is still struggling to adapt to the foreign tissue.”

It was one thing to suspect Kakashi was enduring such hardship. It was another matter entirely to have the world’s number-one medic suggest that Minato's suspicions were only a small part of the real problem.

“Even if it’s not compatible, it’s still an eye, though…” Minato ventured uncertainly, not entirely sure how to phrase his question.

“That’s true, but it’s more complex than that,” Shizune explained. “When you sense chakra, each clan should have a certain 'feel' to them, correct?”

“They do.” Minato thought of each clan's chakra as a different sort of flavour that he was able to differentiate between the more time he spent around them.

“I never noticed.” Tenzo spoke timidly, but with a keen sort of interest.

“I’m not surprised,” Shizune said. “Minato’s sensory talent is still developing, but it’s entirely natural. Most sensory types are simply ninja that have honed a sensing skill over a number of years. Minato is a special case that is able to almost read chakra. He’s good enough that he can read your emotional state pretty effectively. Believe me, he’s quite skilled at that, too.”

“Yes, well.” Tsunade huffed slightly and turned from Kakashi to examine the other two adults shrewdly. “Shizune.”

Said woman jerked upright.

“I’m feeling pretty hungry this morning.”

“I’ll get started right away!” Shizune fled, latching onto Tenzo’s bicep.

There had been a brief window of time where Minato hoped that Tenzo might be just be the person to help Shizune grow a backbone and give her some much-needed independence. Alas, that ship had sailed. Now, instead of just one doormat, Tsunade cheerfully had a pair to meet her every need.

“And you!” Tsunade’s voice lowered. The sound of splintering wood and shrieking emerged from the hallway. “If I ever catch you looking at another woman ever again, I’ll rip off your balls and feed them to you! We clear?!”

“Crystal!” Tenzo obviously had a good sense of self-preservation.

“Minato!” Tsunade barked.

“Yes, Oba-san?” Minato yelped, with a healthy dose of awe and fear as he awaited judgment.

“Come closer.”

Knowing better than to argue, Minato moved closer. One of Tsunade's hands rested on Kakashi’s chest, but her other tapped the hitai-ate covering the Sharingan. Hoping he was reading the situation correctly, Minato placed two fingers over the hitai-ate before meeting Tsunade’s gold eyes curiously.

“Don’t you need to concentrate?”

“While funnelling chakra into another person’s coils is difficult for most people, I’m hardly most people. But never mind that, I want you to isolate the eye and give it a feel.”

“Alright.”

Minato found himself reluctantly curious. He let his eyes fall shut and concentrated on the feel of the tissue—blocking out the rest of the distractions. Kakashi’s chakra was weak, but it still circulated sluggishly throughout his body. Further in, Minato paused, realizing the eye did not quite feel like he expected it would.

Undeniably, Kakashi’s chakra fed into the optical organ, but it seemed diluted and not exactly correct. Concentrating more, Minato tried to get a solid read on the eye itself, before realizing his efforts were just not quite enough. Begrudgingly, he added the diagnostic jutsu to his sensory web and felt a surge of triumph as he penetrated the dense chakra net and…

Oh. Of course, it was such a simple answer. After all these years, Obito’s chakra was still inside.

“Uchiha,” Minato breathed, rather chagrined that it took him so long to arrive at such an obvious conclusion.

“Foreign chakra, unless it's been purified and regulated by a medic that knows what they're doing, is much like the body being exposed to increments of poison continuously. Even small amounts put tremendous strain on the body and other organs.”

Minato wracked his brain. “But many shinobi intentionally poison themselves to build up a resistance. Shouldn’t Kakashi’s body be adapting? It’s been years.”

“It is adapting.” Tsunade smiled almost fondly down at Kakashi. “But I can tell that a significant drain on Kakashi’s chakra reserves is tiring out his body on a physical level. Ordinarily, even when shinobi become low on chakra, they can still continue in a purely taijutsu spar if their conditioning is good. And Kakashi”—Tsunade patted his abdomen— “is in terrific shape. But unlike most shinobi, if his chakra depletes to a certain point, his physical stamina will be overwhelmed by backlash of exhaustion from that eye.”

“Meaning the Sharingan is just as much a curse as it is a blessing,” Minato said, troubled.

"I've considered different treatments, but I'm afraid medical ninjutsu can only do so much. Kakashi is using a foreign power that his body was never meant to manage."

"Will he be alright?" *This time?*

"He'll be fine." Tsunade's hands stopped glowing and she roughly tore back the comforter to throw it over Kakashi's unresisting body. "I expect he'll wake up sometime this afternoon. And I wish I knew how he made it all the way here before collapsing."

Minato winced.

"Nii-san is determined sometimes."

"A stubborn fool, more like it." Tsunade urged Minato up and toward the door. "Now let's go get some food."

Minato's stomach growled and he flushed lightly while Tsunade barked out a laugh.

"I think I could eat."

"Good. Let's go."

Shizune the miracle worker had whipped up a breakfast of sweet buns, eggs, and fresh fruit. A dressed, if slightly dishevelled, Tenzo was setting the table. Tsunade merely plunked herself onto a chair and grunted—a gesture that *might* be interpreted as thanks—as she accepted a mug of tea from Shizune and a plate of food from a nervous Tenzo.

After a few minutes of silence at the table, Minato could not take it anymore.

"Tenzo-san, what time are you meeting your team?"

"Ah, we usually meet at nine so I have over an hour to be there." Tenzo exchanged a fond smile with Shizune. "Your placement exams are coming up, right?"

"Tomorrow," Minato agreed easily. "Naruto is overconfident, Sasuke is annoyed, and Hinata is more worried about clan politics to bother with worrying about her placement."

"What's wrong now?" Tsunade perked up, attracted by gossip like most were.

“You remember what a big kerfuffle there was when Hizashi-san married Uchiha Maiko, Tsunade-sama?” Shizune interjected with a knowing look.

“How could I miss it? The panic over those two having children was annoying as hell. It's just as well that the brat they had was born without the Byakugan. The headache I would have had if they had tried to put an Uchiha in the branch family would have been a nightmare.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what this has to do with Hinata-san,” Tenzo dared to interject. “Hizashi-san’s daughter is just an infant, but he has been married for three years…”

“Oh.” Minato grinned. “Mikoto and Hiashi came out to their clans and admitted they were in a relationship.”

Minato felt a surge of satisfaction when Tenzo leaned over, choking on a grape.

“Hinata said that everyone was so shocked, one of her clan elders had to be hospitalized.”

“I vaguely recall we admitted one of those old codgers last weekend.” Tsunade rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “No wonder your little friend has been worried.”

Conversation continued to flow, but eventually breakfast was concluded. After depositing his dish in the sink, Minato returned to Tsunade’s side.

“I’ll need to shower and get dressed, but do you want to spend some time together, Oba-san? You could train with me, or play cards, or whatever?”

Knowing what was coming, Minato devoted almost all his free time to training by himself or working with his friends. Even if they played together, he would find ways to incorporate some kind of training into their fun. But that became less and less necessary as growing stronger became paramount for all of them.

As fun as it was, this made spending time with Tsunade and Kakashi a rarity and especially necessary to continue nourishing his relationships with them.

“How about this—” Tsunade’s eyes gleamed. “We play

cards. If you win, I'll teach you a new jutsu. If I win, you have to do all the housework for a month. And after we train, we'll hit the new gambling den in town! That pervert sent me some more money!"

"Alright," Minato said. "You're on."

A night of gambling promised a night of losses, but it was a small price to pay if it made Tsunade happy.

After excusing himself, Minato checked in on Kakashi, pleased to see his brother's colouring was looking a little better. Still, having a more thorough understanding of what the Sharingan was doing to Kakashi's body was disquieting to say the least.

Kurama, I need to do something about this.

If Tsunade is aware of it and unable to act, what makes you think that anything you do will help?

I don't know, but not doing something is worse than giving up.

I'm not saying it's impossible, but I feel pretty confident that the Kakashi we encountered in the future was far more powerful than this one currently is. The Sharingan may be taxing for him, but he was capable of standing up to Obito. That alone is impressive.

I wonder if I could craft a seal to filter the chakra artificially.

I've heard of worse ideas. And you certainly possess the creative knack for devising such a seal. Still, I imagine it would take you years to develop and it would require significant testing to see if it might work.

As long as you don't screw with my chakra control again.

One time. And you were pretty impressed with me.

I was. Even though it took me months to fix what you did. I still can't believe you replicated that chakra like that.

It wasn't easy. Minato just knew Kurama was puffed up like a pleased strumpet. ***But when Naruto was using my Yang half's chakra, I could hardly let such an opportunity pass. I simply absorbed that chakra back into myself and—***

Yes, yes, I know. You played with the chakra until you had recreated the equivalent of 25% of your Yang reserves. Honestly, I'm

thankful it was only that much.

It was the most I could possibly do. And boy, did Kurama sound irritated by that. ***Chakra is only chakra. Literally, my soul was split into two pieces and my chakra with it. Without reintegrating with my other half, a fourth of my chakra is the limit of what I can manufacture and maintain of the Yang half. You should be thankful I bothered at all…***

As you stated, you could hardly resist the opportunity. It is your *chakra after all, Kurama.*

You piss me off, sometimes.

Oh, I'm aware! I can't wait until I create a new jutsu and we have a friendly debate over naming rights!

As if I'd give you a choice. If you had your way, all your techniques would take an hour to recite!

Harsh! But possibly true…

"Hmm…pup?"

"Aniki!" Minato shot up, startled.

That asshole* is *hiding his chakra.

Kakashi's lone eye was blinking, but his brother tellingly did not make a move to get up. Instead, his head turned slightly and Minato could just see his nose quirking under the mask.

"I'm here!" He shot forward until he was hovering just a scant distance above Kakashi's face. "Just try to relax. You're a mess, Nii-san."

"Couldn't miss you going to the Academy," Kakashi rasped faintly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Minato chided him. He had been alive too long to fall for a pathetic puppy eye—even if Kakashi was legitimately not feeling well. "Tomorrow is not my first day. Tomorrow, the placement exams happen."

"Wouldn't miss it," Kakashi slurred lightly, his eye fluttering closed.

This man. Honestly. Minato dropped his forehead against Kakashi's for a moment.

"You're not our father, Kakashi. Stop worrying that you'll turn into him."

Minato pulled away and watched the even rise and fall of his brother's chest for a few moments.

A seal to fix that eye may be a farfetched dream, Minato, but I know you won't give up on something like that. Think on it later. For now, go enjoy some time with Tsunade. A day off training helps you remember what you're fighting for.

I better get going, then…Tsunade's training regime isn't for the faint of heart.

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within the shady organization. Fū rather likened it to slavery under an evil magician.

What was clear was that Foo and Torune were as socially repressed as she had been as the jinchuuriki of Taki. All of them had been given a second lease on life. Torune and Foo were given freedom and their families and Fū had become Shiranui Fū: a jinchuuriki to no one save her friends and the Hokage.

How she handled her new life situation was also wildly different from how her teammates managed. While Fū had chosen to immerse herself in the life Genma had provided her, her friends hadn't. Torune was skittish and clingy at times; it was almost as if the other boy was afraid the rug would be pulled out from underneath him at any given time. Foo went in the opposite direction; there was a verbal combativeness and a tendency to disregard social boundaries just to see if he could get away with it. In other moments, Foo was sweeter than sugar and so protective of Fū and Torune that he had gotten into fights on their behalf—and unfortunately won most of them. It made him exhausting to deal with, but Fū knew better than to judge. She had been judged enough for a lifetime, after all.

If slogging through a few hoops was what she had to do for her friends, it was a rather small price to pay.

“Yo, Tenzo, are you taking us to lunch today?”

Fū was forced to reread the last paragraph. She willed herself to ignore the fact that Foo had deliberately omitted the honorific. Again.

“I was planning on giving you the day off, Foo-kun,” Tenzo-sensei replied warily.

“Yeah, well, your team needs to eat,” Foo snapped back testily. “Fork over the funds! It’s your turn!”

“Just because I’m your sensei, does not mean I’m going to feed you all the time.” Tenzo-sensei demonstrated that he really was learning: he kept his tone even and almost friendly. “But since you are my favourite students, I’ll treat you tomorrow. *If* you perform to my satisfaction.”

Fū tensed and she heard Torune’s allies buzz tellingly.

“Ugh, I wanted barbecue today, sensei! It’s not fair!”

Oh, thank Kami. Whining meant a major mood swing had been averted.

"I'm sorry, Foo! But I have something to take care of today."

Okay, learning to eavesdrop while reading was definitely one of Fū's most amazing achievements. Without it, she would miss out on way more drama and opportunities to harass the people she loved most.

"Foo, he's got a date with Shizune-sempai! *You* of all of us should be able to tell Tenzo-sensei got some last night. He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday!"

"Gack! What?! Absolutely not!"

"Hey..." Foo sounded almost angry. "You're right! I thought his shirt smelled a bit ripe, but that mark on his neck is a dead giveaway! I can't believe I missed that! And what is that stain on your pants!"

"I did not have sex with that woman!"

"Yeah, whatever. Tell that to Shizune-sempai." Fū grinned into her book.

"Tenzo-sensei, reproductive processes are a biological function that you should not be ashamed of."

Fū tried not to giggle as Torune went into lecture mode, but failed utterly when her sensei made a sound like a dying chicken.

"However, I believe adequate aftercare is a fundamental aspect of personal hygiene. May I recommend that you make alterations to your sleep schedule to accommodate that requirement? My allies find your scent distasteful—as do I."

After another good chuckle, Fū went back to tuning out her friends. This lasted only a few minutes until one of them inevitably became bored.

"I don't see how you can possibly read that upside down, Fū." An exasperated sigh came from below.

Turning a single, orange eye, onto the redheaded Yamanaka

below her, Fū winked.

"Lots of practice," she replied casually. "Gai-san's rival, Hatake-san, is able to read while training, walking, and talking to other people. I knew I wanted to be able to do that too. So, I practiced."

"As long as you don't pick up Kakashi's chronic tardiness, we'll have no problem."

"Hokage-sama!" The cry came from all her comrades.

Smoothly, Fū tucked her book into her pouch and flipped down to land between Foo and Torune.

The Sandaime was just like the warlord in the book she was reading, possessing the wisdom of a hundred battles and the old age to go with it! These qualities, coupled with a genial attitude that concealed a ruthless streak, made Fū appreciate just how powerful the old man really was.

Uchiha Itachi, one of her first friends, had grown to match the Sandaime's height at thirteen. Unfortunately, he had become far more serious with age, which was really, really frustrating. Itachi's reticence forced Fū into working harder to drag out those occasional half-smiles and even rarer laughter.

Uchiha Itachi was not some statue…he was just repressed like Fū had been. No one understood repression like she did, which made her just the person for cracking Itachi's shell.

"Not to worry, Hokage-sama!" Fū offered a casual salute that had the Sandaime's lips twitching slightly. "Tardiness isn't *youthful*!"

As expected, her teammates spluttered and Tenzo-sensei choked in shock. Pulling out the big guns was terribly useful and had the added bonus of being hilarious.

Unfortunately, the Hokage was not so easily moved by talk of youth. And darn it all, Itachi had been desensitized after years of training with Gai-san. Fū pouted silently. She would have to think of another way to break Itachi's impassiveness today.

"Don't say stuff like that!" Foo shouted. Lazily, she dodged the swipe from her comrade. "It's horrifying!"

Undeterred by such tactics, Fū grinned madly. “Sorry, Foo!”

“Your apologies are insincere, Fū. Nevertheless, the entertainment value of seeing Sensei and Foo so riled up quite makes up for it,” Torune intoned with the barest hint of amusement in his normally stoic countenance. “I approve.”

In spite of the betrayed looks Tenzo and Foo were shooting at Torune, Fū bumped hips with the taller boy and extended her opposite hand into a V-for-victory pose.

Unnoticed by everyone else, Fū saw Itachi’s lips twitch slightly.

Hell yeah! Double victory!

A soft *ahem* drew their attention. Instantly, everyone sobered and focused on the Hokage.

“I understand that you have accessed your bijuu’s chakra, Fū-san,” the Sandaime said gravely.

“I did.” Fū fiddled with her fingers nervously. “I didn’t think it was a bad thing, Hokage-sama.”

What was the point of being a jinchuuriki if you could not access that power? Without Choumei, her life would be very different. In fact, Fū shuddered to imagine what would have become of her in backwater Takigakure.

“If she had not, it is likely one of us may have perished, Hokage-sama.” Foo spoke out of turn, a dangerous flash in his eyes.

“Hokage-sama is not here to reprimand Fū for her actions, which likely preserved the lives of her comrades.” Itachi spoke with a staggering amount of authority as he stepped forward. “However, if we are to help Fū develop her power, we must be certain of all the facts. Without these facts, we may choose a course of action that may be unsafe for ourselves, or even for Fū. A jinchuuriki is not exempt from being damaged by interacting with their bijuu. Yamanaka-san, you have perceived an offense where none was intended.”

The wind chose that moment to blow through the area. Fū felt her matching pigtails flutter slightly and her chest tightened for a minute as Itachi’s intense gaze tore through her.

Sometimes, it was still a shock to be reminded that she had people that cared about her now. Happy endings were not just in her books.

"Thank you, Itachi-kun," Fū whispered softly, noting the taller boy inclining his head curtly. Instinctively, she slapped her friends' shoulders. "And even if you didn't have to, thanks for sticking up for me."

"Yeah," Foo groused. "Sorry, Hokage-sama."

The aging Kage lifted a pencil-thin brow, but seemed to accept the apology at face value since he nodded slightly.

"Let's work out the details now. Your first use of the Nanabi's chakra happened on your last mission, correct?"

"No." Fū fidgeted again. "Choumei used his chakra to get me out of Taki. Otherwise, I would never have stood a chance."

The Hokage went still and suddenly Fū was aware that Itachi's dark eyes were red with black commas and the Sandaime was staring her down like a hawk looking at a mouse.

"Choumei?" The Hokage said.

Maybe it was not intentional, but Fū took a step back, suddenly afraid.

Fū? You're in Konoha…why are you scared?

"It's…the Nanabi's name." Fū shot Itachi a pleading look, feeling insecure and terribly nervous. "We talk sometimes. He's…"

Fū stared at her dusty toes and fought the sudden urge to bolt. A sudden weight on her shoulder put a halt to those thoughts. Following the hand to its owner, she was surprised by the encouragement she read in the spinning depths of the Sharingan.

Fū?

"I'm okay, I'm okay!" she said aloud, even if it was more for her bijuu's benefit than her audience. Finally straightening resolutely, she looked her leader in the eye and took a breath. "Choumei is my friend…we talk sometimes."

"Wow, you talk with it? That's fascinating," Foo murmured

next to her, sounding totally like the nerdy Yamanaka he was.

"I see." the Hokage's gaze had softened somewhat, but he folded his arms calmly. "Itachi?"

"The seal is perfectly intact and, from what I can discern, she is suffering no coercion."

The atmosphere immediately lightened and the pressure she felt from the Hokage dissipated.

"I was scared," Fū blurted out uncomfortably. "Choumei can tell when I'm afraid."

"I have no objection to developing a relationship with your bijuu so long as you are careful about doing so. It's rather common knowledge that the Raikage's brother maintains a partnership with his bijuu. If you were to cultivate such a relationship with the Nanabi, I would support that." The Hokage paused. "As long as you proceed carefully. This is as much a precaution for you as it is for everyone else."

"I understand, Hokage-sama."

"Then as long as your seal is functioning appropriately, I see no problem."

"So, is Fū-chan going to strut her stuff now?" Foo piped up, looking way too interested.

"Fū, I'll be ready if I need to step in. Just…go." Tenzo-sensei looked like the worried mother hen he was, though he put on a brave face.

"You got it, Sensei!" Fū chirped, slowly beginning to feel more secure. She paused once and flashed a smile to Itachi. "I was nervous. Thanks for helping back there!"

With that, she dashed into the field and anxiously shifted her weight back and forth.

"Okay."

Fū shook out her arms and legs and tried to force her body to relax.

"You can do it, Fū-chan!" Foo called from the sidelines.

“Foo, perhaps you should not distract our teammate during such a crucial exercise.”

“Both of you, shut up!” Tenzo-sensei grouched.

Can we work together, Choumei?

I have no complaints. You are a good hatchling.

Fū flushed hotly, her tan cheeks already warm from the sun.

I would advise restricting how much chakra you practice with for the time being. My chakra, regardless of my own will, plays off your emotional state. Something as small as irritation will be augmented by a staggering amount and may cause you to lose control.

Thank you for looking out for me, Choumei. You’re quite the pal.

You're welcome, hatchling. Don’t fall now.

What do you mean, fall?

Fū rocked backward as the ground beneath her feet groaned, cracked, and finally exploded from the sheer pressure of the toxic red chakra emanating from her body. On a whim, she smashed her foot into the ground, gaping when a crater whose diameter matched her height appeared beneath her.

“Holy shit!” she whispered, just as Foo called, “That is fucking overpowered bullshit, Sensei!”

Yeah, I just might have to agree with that statement…

The pressure of the chakra suddenly spiked and Fū gasped. She planted her hands on her knees as it built.

“Shiranui Fū, are you alright?”

That one was the Hokage, but Fū did not answer. She couldn’t.

“The chakra is becoming denser, I’ll use my Mokuton to stop it.”

“No. Fū is in control, but she is manifesting—”

Manifesting what?

She gasped then as the pressure intensified before being washed away by a glorious sensation of relief. Fū sighed and looked down at her shaken, disbelieving comrades, waving thankfully.

The Hokage looked pleased and Itachi looked almost proud. Lazily, she glanced to her left, grateful for the breeze providing some relief from the superheated chakra flowing through her veins.

“The development seems peculiar, but it's nevertheless impressive.”

“You’re flying, Fū! How does it feel? Holy crap, I can’t believe she’s flying! Do you see that, Torune?! Her insect is way cooler than yours!”

“Debateable, but I appreciate the positive sentiment directed toward insects.”

“Flying?” Fū repeated stupidly. “I’m flying?!”

Fū looked down, found her stomach sinking, and suddenly she was freefalling. With a cry, she refocused and cocooned herself in Choumei’s chakra. Trying to get a sense of the appendages as they fluttered purposelessly, she focused on making them beat. If each stroke was a punch... As if in mediation, Fū imagined Gai’s voice ordering her to ignore everything except the task at hand.

It worked.

Fū’s descent paused and she hovered in midair with only a light wave of Choumei’s chakra flowing through her body.

“I did it,” she remarked stupidly before shouting with wilder enthusiasm. “I did it!”

I knew you were plucky. Good job, hatchling.

Thank you, Choumei! I’ve always dreamt of flying into the clouds…maybe I can now!

She spent several minutes just practicing keeping aloft, but the movements were repetitive and soon became intuitive. It was a simple matter to maintain altitude, a little less easy to steer, but every

turn came easier than the last. The group below continued to talk and exclaim, but Fū ignored them all as she twisted, went from low to high and back down again.

Fū flipped again and giggled.

"This is so fun!" She whooped! "I have wings like a big, giant—"

Don't say bird.

Wasn't gonna!

"Look at me! I'm a flying bug girl!"

There are worse names, I suppose.

Out of the corner of her eye, Fū spied the Sandaime speaking in hushed tones to a nodding Tenzo-sensei. Itachi was standing nearby, looking far too bored for her liking.

Without considering the nous of this particular situation, Fū descended and slid her arms through Itachi's armpits and lifted him up. The boy—because a thirteen-year-old could not really be considered a man—was easy enough to carry for someone with her strength. Though Fū really would have to tease him later for his sweet, frilly-smelling shampoo. Her victim hardly struggled; she would even go so far as to say that he expected her to do this.

"You didn't use a Kawarimi."

"I did not."

"How come?" she prodded again, even as she flew in sweeping circles and swooping dives.

"Under the Sandaime's tutelage, I have come to master many principles, but I've yet to uncover a method for flight. Such an opportunity in life is rare. I would be a fool to reject it."

It was as close to a declaration of excitement as she would get.

"Then we'll go flying again. Every Wednesday. It can be our thing!"

"It sounds like an interesting tradition."

“Knew you wouldn’t be able to resist.”

“I haven’t said yes, yet.”

“Yeah, you did. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Is that so?”

She ignored the question as it was rhetorical anyway. Itachi seemed so mysterious, but he was just as young and unsure as she was. He just hid it better than most people.

“Remember this moment if you really become Hokage, Itachi,” Fū declared as she turned them away from the bright afternoon sun. “Even if you're stronger than I am, I’ll always take you into the clouds. Deal?”

Flying almost close enough to touch the white puffy clouds, Itachi laughed once; it was a bright, untainted thing that was both wonder and innocence intertwined together.

“You have a deal.”

“Me next!” Foo shouted, hopping up and down from below like crazy. “Take me next, Fū!”

“Hell with that, she’s gonna come get me!”

Instantly, Fū swivelled in midair and felt Itachi clutch her arms reflexively.

“Genma!” Fū squealed! “I’m coming to get you!”

It was a beautiful day.

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the program during the interview process. Some thought it harsh, but Koharu called it necessary. Weeding out students with unsuitable dispositions saved Konoha precious funds and potential betrayals down the road.

Hiruzen had been hesitant to implement the interview with a T&I official for prospective students, but Koharu steamrolled that answer with common sense—helpfully pointing out that psychological head cases had no business learning shinobi arts.

Call them what you will, future genin were a priceless village resource and not so easily replaced.

Until Koharu had revamped the Academy, the graduation exam passing rate had been a piddling nine children average per graduating class. An unacceptable number considering that it took years to produce quality shinobi.

Everything had changed when she took over the program. The first thing to go had been the staff: she fired them. All of them. Most were slothful chunin that had forgotten what it was like to perform anything above a C-rank mission. What would they know about being a jounin anyway?

After the staff, Koharu had to work on the Academy itself. A group of village tradesman were hired to gut, renovate, and expand the Academy building. A specialized group of ninjutsu users were commissioned to redesign the Academy and its grounds to fit her vision of a successful learning centre.

First, the craftsmen were advised to make smaller classrooms conducive to smaller class sizes. Koharu ordered the development of special rooms for more explosive topics, reinforcing them with seals to prevent permanent damage in the case of classroom incidents.

Out back, civilian contractors had lain the foundation for a swimming pool. It was sadly not uncommon for some students to be incapable of swimming. Koharu had eliminated that problem entirely by making it a requirement of physical conditioning. Beyond that, Koharu knew for a fact that older students in chakra control courses used the pool to hone that ability further; Shizune had reported that Tsunade's medical class at the hospital had made progress thanks to such exercises.

This last year, the tactical director had requested the use of

the pool for underwater combat training scenarios. Koharu had approved, of course. While underwater combat was incredibly unlikely, she was a firm believer in being prepared for every scenario.

As for her chosen shinobi assistants, Koharu put them to work building multiple special training zones. The ranged weaponry zone was a significant change from what it used to be. Targets were set up high to low with a few mechanical moving pieces to simulate a live target. The tree platforms enabled students to get a feel for what they learned in math classes; how angles and aerodynamics affected different equipment. Senbon, kunai, and shuriken had to be thrown differently and with different applications of force from varying directions. Simple mechanics, maybe, but not something most genin realized prior to Koharu's updated Academy program.

The specialized terrain areas were used for physical conditioning, taijutsu training, and the tactics class. Koharu had arranged for doton users to create an entire training area made of stones and little else. Another area that was nothing but hills of sand. A grove of trees provided by the Mokuton user to simulate the home terrain they would be most comfortable in. And since space and technical problems became a real issue, Koharu had settled on a swamp terrain for the final training zone.

When Koharu read the initial reports on how classes were taught, she had been even more appalled than initially. But when she had read the student assessments, she discovered the real problem.

Children from civilian and shinobi backgrounds were thrown together and expected to flourish.

Honestly, Koharu had no idea what Hiruzen and these bumbling idiots had been thinking. Civilians tended to have a better academic grasp and knew next to nothing about the importance of physical conditioning and anything else from the shinobi world. This led to frustrated clan students who felt they were held back and civilians that never had proper guidance to begin with.

Needless to say, Koharu had scrapped that and drawn up plans for Academy placement exams and interviews. With the exams, they would be able to determine which students required help in math and which did not; which students had experience with weaponry and who were beginners; who was good in hand to hand combat; and who had no experience at all.

Knowledge was power. Certainly, that was not in dispute. But how that knowledge was introduced would determine the success of their children.

The first graduating class since Koharu took over debuted this year. The preliminary reports from jounin-sensei, and the two apprenticeships she arranged, were everything Koharu had hoped for. Not perfect, but far and above what she could have expected.

One failed team. One out of nine. Hiruzen had been shocked and Koharu had quietly pocketed a hefty bag of ryo notes from that particular victory.

Ultimately, her goal was to have zero failed teams. The program she had implemented was costly, but effective when it produced results that would repay Konoha's coffers ten times over.

After the placement exams, Koharu would be left to arrange the students into appropriate classes. Age was not a factor. What mattered was that each individual received instruction that would lead them to success, for the village's sake as well as their own.

Finding suitable instructors had been another challenge, simply because the requirements were demanding—but Koharu had been persistent. She created core classes and optional classes that students could only take if they met certain standards.

Basic math, reading, and writing were mandatory unless a student was able to test out of them. Universally, mathematics was the most difficult and Koharu only occasionally noted a student capable of testing out before receiving instruction. Reading and writing were treated almost as remedial programs, but proved worth their timeslots since children hailing from orphanages often benefited and would have otherwise failed due to illiteracy.

Basic first aid was a class, taught by Shizune, that everyone was required to pass at some point. Every single individual would learn the basics that did not require medical jutsu; wrapping injuries, treating burns, and field splints. If a certain student had an aptitude, Shizune would discuss enrolling them in the medic courses offered at the hospital.

Koharu had established basic weaponry care and proficiency classes—mostly for the benefit of children coming from civilian backgrounds. After students became good enough to be trusted to handle the weaponry, they would be placed with the rest of

their peers until they developed decent accuracy with kunai and shuriken.

Students that demonstrated talent in ranged weaponry were invited to take part in Friday workshops, where jounin specializing in different weapons would make appearances periodically. This allowed the kids the opportunity to see how they fared with a variety of tools. Koharu already suspected quite a few from this year's children would be offered the Friday workshop—children from virtually all the clan heads in the village were bound to impress.

The class dealing with history and foreign affairs was possibly one of the more tedious, but also the most crucial. Koharu had been hard-pressed to find a teacher capable of drilling the information into resistant skulls in a way that would stick. Thankfully, a towering hulk of an Inuzuka stepped into the role and ruled the classroom by somehow making boring diplomatic missions sound like the latest edition of Jiraiya's trashy yet addictive novel. One could hardly argue with results, so Koharu forgave the occasional complaints of vulgar language after she saw the rise in test scores from that class.

Physical conditioning and taijutsu practice were overseen by two individuals. The first, a retired member of the Sarutobi Clan, drilled his little monkeys with shocking fervour for a man suffering from an infirmity in his leg. His counterpart, a deceptively mild-mannered Hyuuga branch kunoichi, took sadistic pleasure in running the students ragged. Koharu knew incoming students—particularly the Nara brand—would be in for a rude awakening with these two.

Dividing the curriculum for chakra control, ninjutsu, and genjutsu had been a tough sell, especially since Koharu steadfastly insisted that different teachers were necessary for each division. Koharu had won—as always—after arguing that chakra control was crucial to all other subjects, while genjutsu and ninjutsu were closer to specializations. Genjutsu was now being taught by Uchiha Mikoto and ninjutsu had been handed over to an impressive ninjutsu specialist that was a shoe-in for tokubetsu jounin.

Special courses were precisely that: special. Not everyone would see the inside of an encryptions classroom. Not everyone would make it through a calligraphy class to introductory fuinjutsu. And certainly, fewer still would make it into an introduction to poison theory. The classes for sabotage involved trap-making and information-gathering so that would likely be one of the few special

courses that saw lots of use, but that was that.

"The tactics class is not for the faint of heart," Koharu said, testing the resolve of the chunin standing across from her. "It requires a certain level of creativity and the ability to run countless scenarios with your students on a live training field. My last instructor was a Nara that left because he had been promoted to black ops due to his ability to strategize and promote the concept of teamwork. Tell me, Umino-san, do you have what it takes to organize such a class?"

"I do." The conviction was there, but not quite as solid as she would have preferred.

Umino Iruka: an unusual case. A chunin that had had a brief but impressive association with ANBU. Some amount of sensory talent coupled with an absolutely devoted and loyal mindset. Decent ninjutsu. Decent taijutsu, but nothing over-the-top extraordinary. In fact, if not for his ANBU record…Koharu would never have considered him for the position.

In ANBU, Umino Iruka had demonstrated a keen mind capable of coming up with impressive strategies on the fly. His quick thinking had saved several missions that would otherwise have been doomed to failure. Nothing outwardly impressive about the man, except that he was Nara-sharp.

"Impress me, Umino-san," Koharu murmured. "Failure to do so will not end well for you."

The young man in front of her straightened and she felt her lips curl upward. His expression screamed that he would show her—show them all.

Good. Koharu always preferred it when someone actually had a backbone.

"I will." This time, the response was iron-hard.

"That's just what I was hoping to hear. Now, Umino-san, come." She beckoned him over to her window where they stood and together stared at the arriving students. "Tell me what you see."

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for errors. Her stomach was a bit queasy from hunger and her muscles quivered with the need to move and stretch, but she ignored it all for the paper between her fingers.

She risked a glance to the left. A bored-looking proctor was sitting on the desk twirling a pen and staring the room down. Just above the man's head was a clock showing 12:22.

Eight minutes left. Sakura could work with that.

Sakura attended to the final equation and sent a silent thanks to her parents. If they had not pressured her to focus on mathematics, she knew she would have been like the blond boy two seats over who was vocalizing his misfortunes for the rest of the room to hear.

Of course, Sakura knew her parents had groomed her to be savvy with numbers so that she would be able to manage a civilian business like they did. Her parents had been dismayed when Sakura insisted on attending the Shinobi Academy. She had refused to back down from her goal, however—not even when her parents dangled a shopping spree or a trip outside the village as bribes. Sakura wanted something exciting from life. Something different than what her parents had.

Of course, nothing was ever that easy.

Sakura heard it really had just been a matter of enrolling in the program a few years ago. Apparently, that went out the window when one of the Sandaime's top advisors took over the Academy.

Last week, when Sakura finally convinced her father to sign her up, she had been given a date and time for an interview. She had thought it was just a meeting with her future teacher.

Yeah, no. Instead, Sakura had been sent into a room with her parents and interviewed—*interrogated* like in some creepy television show. At the end of her "interview," the woman had smirked and ordered her to show up for placement exams.

Placement exams!

Sakura had returned home in a daze and wondered exactly what she had gotten herself into. But then her mother had given her *that look* and suggested it was perfectly reasonable to pull out and go to a respectable civilian school.

That had been just the motivation she needed. Sakura had excused herself to her room to study: she had an exam to beat.

The paper told her the test began at seven sharp so Sakura naturally arrived half an hour ahead of time and determinedly shook off her parents—even though she really, really wanted them with her—and walked into the large, looming building.

Stepping inside with her notice, Sakura was instantly directed to a classroom at the far end of the hall by a woman wielding a clipboard. It seemed odd that she had passed at least two other classrooms that seemed to be exam rooms—just how many people were taking this test anyway?

To her surprise, there were easily thirty individual desks in the room with at least half a dozen occupied right off the bat. Sakura had taken a seat at the front and hunkered down to wait.

She had not had to wait long. Kids of varying ages flooded into the room; most were probably in the six-to-eight range, but Sakura was amazed by their sheer number.

Sakura had noticed a few boys that picked on her from time to time and shrank further down in her seat. She prayed they didn't notice her. Miraculously—because, come on, a hair colour like hers stuck out like a sore thumb—they sat down without so much as looking her way.

Only about twenty of the desks ended up being used, but Sakura had not had time to think on that for long.

The first exam had been on geography. Sakura had felt alright about that one. The second one had focused on shinobi villages and relationships: Sakura was far less confident. A third exam had focused on reading and writing ability which helped Sakura regain some of her initial enthusiasm. The math exam had been easy enough, with only some of the last problems proving the least bit challenging.

Nevertheless, Sakura felt a sigh of relief escape her as the proctor finally ordered them to drop their pencils.

"Alright, brats, listen up! This concludes the written portion of your tests. You've got an hour for lunch and then it's time for practicals! Get out of here!"

In the blink of an eye, a blond kid was out of his seat,

rocketing across the room and out the door. Half a second later, the remaining students followed suit.

Sakura waited until the majority of them had exited the classroom before stepping into the hallway. Almost instantly, she was accosted by two of the nasty boys that hassled her at the park.

“Hey, look, Enui! It’s Forehead!”

Sakura involuntarily flinched at the moniker and stared down at her feet. What could she really say? Asking them to stop never got her anywhere and telling them it hurt her feelings just seemed to encourage them.

What should she do?

“Not like you could miss her with that ridiculous colour. What is up with that anyway, Forehead? Did you Kaa-san sleep with a stick of bubble gum or something?”

Sakura bit her lip and jerked backward.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone! I’ve never done anything to you!”

“Pfft, you gonna cry, Forehead-girl?”

Sakura felt her lip tremble.

“Gonna cry?”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure that’s about to be you idiots!”

Too fast for Sakura to really process what happened, her tormentors suddenly collapsed to their knees before falling forward on their faces. The bullies were watery-eyed and on the floor clutching their stomachs.

Behind them was a beautiful blonde girl with her hair done up in an elegant bun and wearing dark plum-coloured clothing. The blonde flashed her a cheery smile that took Sakura’s breath away before kicking the weeping lump in front of her with a note of finality.

“Serves you two right, picking on a girl like that! Try it again and I’ll kick your teeth in! Got it?”

“Thank you!” Sakura gushed. She hopped over the groaning

boys and grinned broadly. “That was amazing! How did you do that?”

“What, that?” Her rescuer eyed the weeping pair on the ground before shrugging her shoulders. “They must have been weak. Taijutsu really isn’t my thing, but I couldn’t let them get away with treating you that way. They were jerks!”

It was Sakura’s turn to frown. The other girl really didn't seem to understand how amazing she had been. Without intervention, Sakura knew she might have been able to run away, but she would never have managed to actually *do* something.

“They’re always like that…You saved me. Thank you!” Sakura blurted out before she could stop herself. “Can you teach me to do that?”

“Ah, well. It was nothing! I’m just sort of awesome like that!” The blonde smiled so widely her cheeks dimpled. “I’m Yamanaka Ino. But you can just call me Ino! And you bet I’ll teach you! I’ll show you how to pound some sense into thick skulls! Come with me! We’ll get some lunch!”

“I’m Sakura. Haruno Sakura.” She bowed slightly. “And I would love to have lunch with you, Ino-chan!”

“Great!” The other girl—Ino—slung an arm around Sakura’s shoulders. Sakura watched her new friend glower at the groaning pair that were still on the floor before kicking them viciously—yet again—with elegant heeled sandals.

“Let’s get out of here before those two morons pick themselves off the floor!”

“Yeah!”

Yamanaka. That name rang a bell, but Sakura could not readily ascertain why. Maybe one of the less prominent clans? She really wasn’t sure, but she knew that Ino was super cool and had rescued her from a couple of idiots, and that was worth a lot.

“Were the exams hard for you?”

Sakura blinked as the slightly taller girl ushered her out a door and into a sunny courtyard.

“Not sure I did very well with the shinobi test.” Sakura

flushed red as she admitted her failure. “But I think I did okay on the other stuff.”

“Yeah, if you passed the interview, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about,” Ino replied knowledgably as they walked past an area with all sorts of targets. “And these tests are just going to determine your schedule and class placements.”

“So, you and I might not end up together?” They had just met so that shouldn't have been such a big deal, but Sakura wanted to be around someone she felt comfortable with.

“Hey, don’t worry!” Ino flashed her a broad smile that instantly settled Sakura’s nerves. “We’ll have some stuff together, but we might not have *everything* together. And that way, you’ll never get bored of me!”

Sakura nodded glumly and noted that Ino seemed to be steering them toward a pair of trees where a group of kids lounged in the shade. A few faces turned toward them; some seemed to be giving Sakura a once-over.

She held her breath, waiting for them to make some comment, but no one said anything. No one seemed unhappy with her presence either.

Maybe this really was something of a fresh start.

“Hey, guys!”

A dark-haired girl wearing an elegant white kimono with a lilac obi stood up to meet them as they approached.

“Ino-chan, we’ve been waiting for you.” A curious eye was turned on her and Sakura just knew her face was the same colour as her hair. “You made a new friend?”

“You bet!” Sakura’s heart stuttered at the easy declaration. “This is Sakura-chan! Sakura, this here is Hyuuga Hinata.”

“Nice to meet you, Hyuuga-san!” Absently, she wondered if her greeting was too casual and hoped it would suffice.

“Such formality is something my father might appreciate, but I’m not him,” Hinata murmured and winked once, going far to reassure Sakura. “I’m Hinata to my friends. And if Ino says you’re our

friend, you are."

Wow. All of her doubts about attending the Academy were receding. Sakura had never had such good luck interacting with other children. It certainly obliterated her parents' preconceived ideas about the reception Sakura would receive outside of a civilian school.

"Thank you, Hinata-san!" Sakura smiled, brightening as she saw an answering grin curve onto the gorgeous girl's face.

"Shika, how can you possibly be sleeping already!" Ino shouted, startling Sakura.

She watched the blonde girl approach a boy that was dozing against one of the trees. Sakura's new friend muttered something less than appreciative before planting her sandal in the sleeping boy's gut.

"Wake up, idiot!"

Sakura opened her mouth to protest the harsh treatment, but the lazy boy barely seemed to notice Ino's outrage despite the physical abuse. Instead, he flopped over and grumbled something about "troublesome women."

"What did he just say?" Sakura asked, rather annoyed by the muttered sexism.

"Eh, Shikamaru is always saying crap like that," Ino grumbled as she retreated. "Really pisses me off."

"Is he always like that?" Sakura asked tentatively.

"Who, Nara?"

Sakura turned toward the voice, finding a boy wearing a heavy coat with fur around the collar. He flashed a toothy grin in her direction.

"That guy sleeps more than the dead. Honestly, if Ino and Minato didn't push him as much as they do, he would never succeed at anything. I'm Inuzuka Kiba, by the way."

"Oh, nice to meet you, Kiba-san," Sakura murmured, not entirely sure what to do with that information.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the boy's jacket

hood began to quiver. “Gah! Something is in your coat!”

A second later, a black, quivering nose appeared, followed by the most adorable, shaggy-coated puppy that Sakura had ever seen.

“A puppy!?” A puppy? Why would there be a dog in someone’s coat?

“A ninken,” Kiba corrected, rubbing the pup’s head with an affectionate finger. “He’ll be my partner as a shinobi. I can’t wait until he’s big enough to rip apart our enemies with his teeth alone!”

Sakura shot a dubious look at the puppy, but figured she was better off refraining from total honesty this early into making new friends.

“Take a seat, Sakura-san.” Hinata dropped down onto the grass.

Sakura was careful to follow suit. “Thank you,” she said, wishing she had actually packed a lunch today instead of choosing to skip. Not that anyone else was eating either… “Did you guys forget to bring a lunch too?”

“Nah.” Ino sat down next to her after giving Shikamaru a final glower. “Chouji-kun should be here with lunch soon. And you’re more than welcome to have some of it, Sakura. And don’t give me any of that polite no-can-do speech. Chouji’s family owns the Akimichi restaurants and his Kaa-san promised us an amazing lunch for placement exams. So, there will be more than enough.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of his family,” Sakura said.

In fact, it was so generous that Sakura was not exactly sure what to do with it. Her family was well-off and often hosted private dinners for other families, but there was always some sort of motive behind their actions. Doing something just to be nice, something that required considerable time and effort was just…not done.

“Chouji’s mom is awesome,” Kiba agreed, only stirring Sakura’s growing pot of confusion. “I can’t wait till the next gathering at his place. Although, you’re all in for a treat at the Inuzuka barbecue this weekend!”

He paused and frowned before poking Sakura, causing her to jump. “Since you’re hanging out with us, why don’t you come too,

Sakura-san?"

"I'll have to ask my parents, but that sounds interesting." It sounded absolutely terrifying, not to mention intimidating. "I would love to be there."

"She'll be there." Ino overrode her insecurities like a battering ram. "I'll make sure of it."

"Cool," was all he responded with.

"And there comes Chouji-kun!" Ino pointed a finger toward a rotund boy ambling their way and carrying a rather large scroll. "Now, where are the others? They should have been here by now… Hinata, do you know where the boys are?"

Sakura turned expectantly toward the other girl, but before she could say anything, Shikamaru spoke.

"Naruto was the first one out of the classroom. Naturally, that idiot ambushed his brother with a barrage of water balloons as he exited. The last I saw, Sasuke chased after him and I haven't seen either of them since. And Neji and Shino were excused from classes today so they won't be here."

That was an awful lot of names and information for her to process.

"Ugh, it figures," Ino grumbled unhappily. "And Minato?"

"Dunno, he was in the same test room with Akamaru and I," Kiba responded easily. "But he isn't the type to ditch us. I'll bet he's trying to wrangle Sasuke and Naruto. We all know that aside from Hinata-chan, Minato is the only one capable of that."

Sakura could not have been more confused if she tried.

"Chouji! My man!" Kiba jumped up and looked to be salivating over the scroll in the portly boy's hands. "Please tell me you got some delicious ribs in there! Please! Please! PLEASE!"

"Are you suggesting my Kaa-san would ever short-change us for food?" There was a staggering amount of threat permeating the air and Sakura's assessment of him automatically, and radically, shifted.

“No!!” Kiba backed away, waving his hands in the air frantically. “I just—” Kiba suddenly latched onto her of all people and dragged her forward. “This is Ino-chan’s new friend, Sakura-san! This is her first time hanging with us and I just know she’s going to love your mom’s cooking!”

The boy—Chouji—did not quite seem to buy Kiba's story, but turned a broad smile in her direction just the same.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sakura-chan!” He grinned smugly as he dropped the scroll he was carrying and knelt over it. With a faint poof of smoke, an enormous picnic blanket covered by more food than Sakura had ever seen in one place outside a festival table appeared. “I’m Chouji! My family enjoys cooking, so please enjoy.”

“Yum!” Hinata, surprisingly, was the first to attach herself to a plate of cinnamon buns, smiling covetously. “Chouji-kun, be sure to pass on my appreciations to Shou-sama!”

“You bet I will!”

“Jackpot!” Kiba had abandoned her and was currently piling two plates full of ribs, barbecued chicken, and other meaty treats for himself and his dog.

“Wow…” Sakura dropped down on the edge of the blanket and looked around uncertainly.

“Is something wrong?” Chouji honed in on her discomfort and gave her a scrutinizing look.

“Err…well.” She gestured helplessly to the rather intimidating spread of goods.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Chouji!” Ino had only gotten a few dumplings onto a plate before scowling. “She’s clearly not sure what she likes! Make some recommendations! She’s a new customer, practically!”

To Sakura’s relief, something about Ino’s speech must have translated well because Chouji looked less worried, less offended, and rather enthusiastic.

“Oh! I should have thought of that! Sorry, Sakura-san!” He radiated such kindness that it immediately set her at ease. “What kind of food do you like? Sour? Sweet? Savoury? Seafood, pork?”

Sakura asked for some savoury suggestions with a request for a dessert with fruit in it. Sakura was not ashamed to say that everything Chouji put on her plate tasted like heaven. Evidently everyone agreed because even Shikamaru was working through a plate of food.

“Hope you guys left some for me!”

Sakura looked up and—the world around her seemed to pause. Her eyes traced white shorts up to a kimono-styled red and white shirt and a necklace from which hung an elongated, sparkling green stone. The boy's face was the one that she recognized based on description: angular cheekbones with a scarlet marking on the chin and each cheek, and red eyes framed by silver bangs that created a picture of perfect symmetry. A hightail that easily reached his lower back completed the look, as did the almost gentle smile aimed her direction.

Sakura found herself fighting down a blush and failing spectacularly.

Senju Minato. This was the boy that featured constantly in discussions throughout Konoha. Sakura had never seen him herself, but she had heard the rumours and the whispers of the adults. Sakura had also been aware that Senju Minato would be attending the Academy soon, but she had not exactly expected to meet him. Or talk to him. Someone like her was way beneath the notice of someone who was Konoha royalty.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sakura-san!” Senju Minato said kindly, and Sakura realized, with no small degree of horror, that someone must have introduced them. And she had totally *missed* that.

Holy crap, he talked to her.

“You too, Senju-sama!” She winced at how timid and pathetic she sounded.

“No need for that!” The boy actually winced himself. “I get it way too often from people as it is.”

Sakura just nodded vigorously, practically swallowing her tongue.

There was a scuffling sound somewhere in the distance. Sakura squinted as a dust cloud kicked up and seemed to be speeding

in their direction.

"Ah, hell." Kiba grunted. "Here they come. I was hoping those two idiots would miss out and leave more for us."

"Kiba-kun." Hinata jumped in with a disappointed glare. "We always have leftovers anyway. You shouldn't be so insensitive."

"Who is that?" Sakura asked faintly as the outlines of two figures appeared through the cloud of dust.

"Uchiha Sasuke and Uzumaki Naruto." Kiba shoved some food into his mouth as he spoke. "Honestly, they're a lot of fun. Sasuke is still a jerk sometimes, but he's gotten better. Naruto's a riot, though! Makes life way more interesting with his pranks! Love that guy!"

Sakura felt her stomach clench slightly. Both names she had heard before; the former with reverence, but the latter with the utmost derision. And maybe it was intended to be subtle, but Sakura was suddenly aware of an intense level of scrutiny from a few different directions. Shikamaru looked alert and was staring at her blatantly. Sakura glanced to her right where Hinata—the girl that epitomized kindness—had paused mid-bite to assess her with an expressionless, eerie look.

And the Senju heir…he was looking pensive, expectant, and…disappointed?

This was some sort of test right now. Something else… something important was happening. Sakura could not fail here or whatever friendships she was building were going to crumble away. Sakura had been enjoying herself up until this moment. She did not want it to end because of the whisperings of her parents.

I'm going to make my own choice. Coming here was my choice and making new friends is going to be my choice too.

"Sounds like some interesting guys," Sakura responded casually as she reached for a bun. "But they better not eat all of these dumplings because they are amazing!"

To her relief, the boys seemed to accept her answer easily, though Hinata continued to watch her with those eerie white eyes of hers. Yeah, the other girl definitely seemed to be wary of her, which kind of hurt Sakura's feelings a little.

The dust cloud got closer and a pair of boys both wearing navy blue and white appeared. But that was where the similarities ended. The taller boy was black-haired with the pale skin and dark eyes common to the famous Uchiha Clan, but his shirt was damp and clinging to him like a second skin. The boy he was chasing had a spiky blond ponytail that ended just above midback and three defining whisker marks on each tanned cheek. Uzumaki Naruto was sunny and grinning like a cat in direct contrast to the Uchiha's dark glower.

"I'm gonna beat you this time, bastard!"

Sakura watched, somewhat mind-boggled, as Sasuke suddenly shot forward so fast he almost blurred, easily coasting past the blond, who began to squawk angrily. The Uchiha stopped at the edge of their little picnic gathering and turned a superior smirk on his less fortunate opponent.

"Maybe next time, idiot." The words themselves were haughty, but sounded somewhat fond considering the blond rolled his eyes and stomped toward them in a huff.

"Yeah, yeah," the blond—no, Naruto—grumbled as he dropped down. "Dang, Chouji! This all looks awesome! Did your mom pack my favourite?"

"In the pot."

Sakura looked toward where Naruto had seized an enormous pot and lifted the lid to reveal…ramen? Sakura blinked and gasped aloud as she saw Naruto sticking his chopsticks directly into the noodles. He began eating them with rather shocking speed and finesse. Even more impressive and disgusting, the soup level began to steadily lower.

"Is he…really going to eat all that?" Sakura ventured faintly.

"You bet!" Kiba crowed. "I learned my lesson the hard way about getting between Naruto and his ramen!"

"Naruto-kun impressed my clan so much with his appetite that we gave him honorary clan status," Chouji added while alternating between devouring a roll and a chicken-kabob.

"Tch, this is nothing." The Uchiha boy interjected as he helped himself to veggie buns and some fresh cherry tomatoes. "You

should see him when Kaa-san lets him go out to Ichiraku's once a month. It's like watching a garbage disposal demonstration."

Hinata immediately rose to the blond's defense. Sakura recognized protective behaviour when she saw it.

"That was unnecessary, Sasuke-kun! Naruto is…" Hinata's vigorous defense ended abruptly and Sakura followed the other girl's line of sight to the tipped over pot that was nearly empty.

"Naruto is an endless pit," Ino griped, but she was humming lightly as she served herself a portion of chicken and vegetables. "But his metabolism is pretty incredible so he can get away with it."

"How did your test go, Sakura-san?" Minato asked, steering the conversation into safer waters.

Sakura nearly choked.

"Sakura?" Naruto's face popped out of the ramen pot. "Who?"

"This flower over here!" Ino winked at her.

"You look familiar…" Naruto trailed off before rolling his shoulders. "Meh, can't remember. Nice to meet you, Bubble-gum!"

Sakura's hands clenched and she snarled viciously.

"What was that, bub?!" In a second flat, she was across the picnic blanket with her fist raised menacingly over a white-faced, horror-stricken Naruto. "What did you call me?!"

"Sakura-san? Did the test not go well?"

Minato's voice tranquilized Sakura's previous rage. Shooting a final glare at the quivering boy shrinking away from her, she shook her fist once more and felt satisfied when Naruto shook his head furiously in acknowledgment of her threat.

Urge to wallop someone somewhat satisfied, Sakura offered a benign smile to the group as she returned to her seat, sat down, and took a calming sip of water.

"Could have been worse. I wasn't really familiar with a lot of the history, but I suppose they'll teach us that anyway," Sakura

remarked calmly. “Not sure what to expect this afternoon.”

“Eh, you probably won’t enjoy it, but it’ll be interesting!” Ino patted her gently. “But don’t worry, I’ll help you catch up with the rest of us.”

Those words proved fairly prophetic. The rest of their allotted time passed quick enough with Ino and Hinata providing most of the conversation. She was determinedly not disappointed when Minato ended up sitting with the boys and engaging with the cool and aloof Uchiha.

Everyone was so different and so nice that she was almost shocked when right after lunch, she was immediately ordered to drop and do push-ups. Which led to a series of sit-ups, crunches, and running that caused that delicious lunch to be thrown back up.

Hinata and Ino helped her clean up before she was immediately ushered into the pool to demonstrate her swimming prowess. That went a little better, but Sakura collapsed five minutes into the assessment for strength training.

Somehow, Sakura knew that becoming a shinobi was going to be a lot more work than she had thought.

Sakura grimaced when she saw Uzumaki Naruto roll into a ball with his hair extending into long, painful looking spikes, that surrounded his body like a porcupine. If this was any indication of her future, Sakura was not sure she was going to make it out of the academy alive.

A second later, a shadow of an instructor fell over her and ordered her back to her feet.

Yep. This was going to be a lot more work than Sakura had imagined.

Just then, Ino winked at her as she raced by and Sakura’s trembling eased just a bit even if it became that much harder to breathe.

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and a notebook—one he deliberately stashed at the Uchiha residence to fool his nosey older brother—flipped open in front of him. A wrinkle settled between his eyebrows as he frowned down at the page's notes.

Two years ago, the Sandaime had commissioned Ishida Naoka, the kunoichi that had poisoned Minato, to provide Naruto with some basic instruction in fuinjutsu. Naturally, this had raised the alarm bells in certain highly overprotective parental figures. Minato had to fight tooth and nail to be in the same room during Naruto's first lesson. He had succeeded, but only after Tsunade and Kakashi agreed to be present alongside the overkill presence of the Sandaime, Mikoto, and her sons.

Seeing Naruto take his first steps on a path that resembled his parents' would have been reward enough, but Minato knew bypassing the opportunity to learn from a woman who had been tutored by a seasoned Uzumaki seal-master was not something he could live with.

Jiraiya had been proficient with seals, but Minato himself had surpassed his former sensei's skills long ago. Kushina had learned much from Mito-sama before the old lady's death, but most of that focus had been on demonic seals for rather obvious reasons. Both of their fuinjutsu skills paled compared to what had been lost upon Uzushio's collapse.

Ishida Naoka may very well possess a reservoir of knowledge that had otherwise been lost. And despite the dubious circumstances of their initial encounter, he would be an idiot not to overlook that in favour of future possibilities.

When the day came for the first lesson, Minato's hopes had been high. After all, Kushina had quite a knack for fuinjutsu and Naruto certainly had the creativity necessary for greatness. Unfortunately, his hopes—and that of a Hokage that had very much wanted to see an Uzumaki seal-master again—were dashed.

Uzumaki Naruto was persistent, but his attention span for any sort of book learning proved less than feasible. This was not to say that Naruto had been incapable of learning, but his interest waned and he made a break for it just under an hour into his lesson.

Refusing to let such an opportunity go to waste, Minato had immediately settled at the table next to his former would-be-killer,

pasted on a smile, and asked her to keep explaining the basics of Uzumaki swirl patterns.

Minato had heard the verbal outcry of dismay from Tsunade and felt the sudden burst of killing intent from Kakashi. Minato had not looked up when the Sandaime's hushed voice basically told the two to sit down and shut up. Minato had kept his focus on the lavender-eyed beauty, who raised an eyebrow before leering with a flash of pearly teeth.

That day, Minato had listened attentively as the woman outlined the basics of calligraphy requirements, lectured on potential hazards, and began listing symbols that formed a verbal codex of all basic sealing techniques.

None of the information had been new to him, but a few of her explanations proved enlightening and revealed that this was indeed someone who knew her craft inside and out. At the end of the impromptu lesson, Minato had thanked the woman and asked in a formal, polite tone if he might have the "honour" of attending Naruto's future lessons.

Again, that request had not gone over well, but the Sandaime had agreed and suggested that lessons in his office might be just the thing every other Wednesday afternoon.

In two years, Minato had covered a significant amount of material and had obviously impressed both Ishida-san and the Hokage with how quick he was picking things up. Thankfully, this genius prowess was offset thanks to the beginner's material, which actually contained some things Minato had never been exposed to. Small things that were useful, but unfamiliar enough that they kept him from looking as if he was learning nothing. A seal to absorb smoke coming off a campfire. A seal that altered a sealing scroll for temperature variation. Little things that all had the potential to be massively useful.

However, that potential had not been realized: not yet. Ishida-san should be moving to more advanced topics soon and Minato sorely hoped he would be provided with techniques that he had not known before.

"Are you well, Minato-kun?"

The voice managed to jolt him from his notes and he looked up. Blinking owlishly, Minato did a double-take at his friend, Hinata,

clad in a basic black t-shirt and shorts.

“What happened to your clothes?” Minato blurted out, unable to quite reason out what he was seeing.

“I guess I’m not the only one surprised,” Hinata said. The girl brushed at her shorts, obviously tense, before gracefully settling down beside him. “Tou-san told me he was tired of replacing my yukatas every time I played or trained with my friends. Also, there may have been some helpful hinting from a certain person.”

Hinata’s eyes flickered toward the doorway of the kitchen meaningfully.

Ah. Mikoto’s handiwork extended to loosening the rigid formalwear the Hyuuga clung to.

“It’s about time you had some proper play clothes,” Minato said finally. “Hanging around Naruto is certainly hazardous to clothing! I think Tsunade would be more irritated about how often my clothing gets ripped if Jiraiya wasn’t sending her spending money so often.”

“What were you working on?” Hinata peered over his shoulder curiously.

“Oh. This?”

Minato glanced at the notes detailing some of his thoughts on the creation of a seal for Kakashi’s eyes. None of it went beyond theory, so…it wouldn't require any level of secrecy.

Minato tapped a finger on the paper. “You know that Kakashi, my aniki, has a Sharingan, right?”

“I remember.” Hinata’s voice had dropped a full mark.

Now, providing an honest answer without fully disclosing the situation was most important. Minato did not want to alienate his friend, but he also understood the value in keeping some information to himself. And for all that his friends were understanding, dojutsu users tended to not appreciate non-clan members having that sort of power.

“What is less common knowledge, is that the eye is more chakra intensive for him than for an Uchiha.”

Minato observed as understanding flickered across Hinata's face, accompanied by a drop of remorse that quickly vanished.

"I would like to create a seal that could reduce"–preferably eliminate— "the chakra required for the Sharingan's use. I'm not sure I'll be able to pull it off, though. The cells of a person's body are incredibly complicated and I'm not sure it's even possible."

Minato smiled humourlessly at the notebook in his hands before adding a notation.

"I'm still going to try, though. I want to help Kakashi."

"You know fuinjutsu?" Hinata asked quietly.

That was not exactly the response he expected.

"I'm learning more all the time," Minato replied, surprised. "I've mentioned that I was interested before, haven't I, Hinata-chan?"

"I think so, but the project you're describing sounds really hard."

"I also said I didn't think I will be able to do it. It might take me years, but I'm not about to give up."

Somehow, he sensed he was missing the point.

"Are you interested in seals, Hinata-chan?"

There was a long pause this time. Long enough for Minato to turn the page and start the form and pattern for a small resistance seal. Something simple and unobtrusive that would not matter if he was caught making it.

"My family uses seals," Hinata said finally, her voice small and feeble, so unlike herself. "I hate it. It's no better than slavery and I would give anything to rid my clan of that burden."

"I see."

The Caged Bird Seal had been around since the Founding Era. It had been distasteful back then, but it was nothing short of abhorrent now. It was a source of political contention that the Daimyo of the Land of Fire felt was a poor reflection on Konoha as a whole. And Hinata's statement, while more politically complex, was accurate. The Hyuuga claimed to be willing to die to protect their dojutsu, but if

that were the truth, the entire clan would wear the seal.

No, the Caged Bird Seal was one of slavery. It had been one of his goals as Hokage to wipe it from existence. Looking at Hinata, Minato could see that dream might be possible again.

“Would you like me to teach you?”

Minato carefully watched Hinata’s mouth tighten and a defiance overtake her expression. Good; she would need a backbone to have even the slightest hope of succeeding.

“I’m still learning myself, of course.” Minato smiled mildly. “But, I’ve been working on this for a couple years now. I’m sure I could help you with some of the basics…if that is something you’d like to learn.”

“Teach me, Minato-kun,” Hinata—no, the Hyuuga Heiress—fiercely stated. “I’ve changed since I’ve met my friends. Maybe if I change a little more, I can change the fate of people besides myself.”

So be it.

“Let’s get to work, then.”

Minato opened to a new page and began explaining to his eager student the fundamentals of sealing as he preferred them—penmanship, symbols, etcetera.

A shadow paused by the doorway, observing the pair intently before finally walking away.

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Activity in the Inuzuka kitchens had picked up a lot over the last few years. They were surprisingly spacious facilities, dwarfed only by the Akimichi's. While clean enough to be considered tidy, Mikoto did not think she would ever get over the tufts of fur that clung to the woodwork, to the cupboards, and even her yukata.

Suck it up, she would. Mikoto was not the same woman she had been. After Fugaku died, Tsume had been the first to call a clan gathering—going so far as to hand deliver Mikoto’s invitation. At the time, she had not been so thankful. But these women had changed her life and, in so doing, helped change Mikoto herself.
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“This is the life!” Tsume crowed. “Only questionable thing is letting the boys hang around outside. They’re lazy enough without enabling them.”

The Inuzuka was shamelessly drinking liquor straight from the bottle while putting some leftovers into tins.

“Nothing to be done about it.” Yoshino smashed her cutting board viciously, drawing looks from all corners. “*That* lazy bastard isn’t about to change. After all these years, he can’t even put his laundry in the hamper!”

“Wring his neck.” Mara shrugged, rolling her eyes like she didn’t really care either way. “Or I could sic Inoichi on him.”

“Like that would work,” Yoshino said bitterly. “They would just go out and get hammered.”

“Only after picking up Chouza.” Shou laughed.

A moment later, Tsunade staggered into the room and dropped a wrapped package on the counter. When Tsume raised a questioning eyebrow, Tsunade merely shrugged.

“Shizune sent dessert rolls.” The Sannin scanned the room huffily. “Where are the drinks, Inuzuka?”

Another eyeroll. “Help yourself. Right cabinet.”

“Thanks.” Tsunade liberated a bottle and a pair of cups from the nearest cabinet with a sour look.

“Tsunade, you seem agitated,” Mara stated while examining her nails with a light frown.

Mikoto was not exactly sure how the oddball relationship between the pair worked. After all these years, it still took her by surprise when Senju Tsunade listened to the somewhat vain, though highly intellectual, Mara.

“Academy,” Tsunade spat. “Koharu’s got him in almost all the advanced bullshit.”

And you’re unhappy, why? My poor Naru-chan barely made it out of the beginner’s math class. At least he did well enough in reading and writing.

“You’ll be stopping by my place, tomorrow,” Mara said as if she were commenting on the weather rather than scheduling an appointment. “A little tea helps everyone.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tsunade waved dismissively. “Your husbands are gambling. I’m going to go make some money!”

Mikoto’s eye twitched slightly as the Sannin blazed out of the room with ryo notes almost visible in her eyes.

“After all these years, you haven’t gotten her to mellow out a bit?” Mikoto grimaced.

“Tch, I’m hardly a miracle worker,” Mara shot back. “Besides, she’s doing well, just not in a way that is any of the business of any of you nosey ladies.”

“Well said,” Mitsuri commented. “Mikoto-san?”

“Yes?”

“Was Hizashi-san’s wife not joining us tonight?”

Right, the only "official" Hyuuga-Uchiha pair would be arriving together and should be showing up at any moment. But since they lived together outside of their respective clan districts, Mikoto could hardly say.

“They’ll be here, but I’m not sure when.” Mikoto smiled faintly. “New babies have a way of causing delays.”

“Something we all understand rather well,” Shou crooned from over her pot by the stove. “I just love babies! I just want to squish them to pieces!”

“Me too.” Yoshino sighed longingly.

“You want another baby, Yoshino?” Mikoto asked, not bothering to mask her surprise.

“Shikaku doesn’t.” Yoshino’s face flushed and she sneered. “He says it would be too troublesome!”

“Can’t be more troublesome than dating Hiashi,” Mikoto muttered.

“That’s actually true?”

Tsume whooped, moving around to sniff her intrusively. Mikoto tried to brush off her questing fingers, but an Inuzuka with a scent on the nose was not so easily deterred.

“Yeah…” the woman confirmed, nose wrinkling in surprise. “It’s not a *strong* smell, but it's definitely in there. More than one Hyuuga too.”

“Okaa-chan!” A white-robed girl slipped into the room and wrapped around Mikoto’s legs like a starfish. “Otou-san is outside. And Nee-san is up on the roof again with the boys!”

“We should have realized how he finally reeled you in!” Yoshino smirked at her over Hanabi’s head.

“Hanabi-chan, here.” Gently lifting the girl onto an empty box, she gestured at the counter. “Shuck some peas for me, okay? You can eat some after we’re done.”

“Of course, Okaa-chan!” little Hanabi squeaked, pigtails bobbing behind her head.

“Okaa-chan?”

It was more than a little unnerving to have Mitsuri stare her down—and she couldn’t even actually see the woman’s eyes!

Mikoto refused to be embarrassed. Hanabi was a child that had no memory of her mother. In addition to that, Hiashi had taken to dumping Hanabi on her every time Hinata came around. Perhaps the impromptu visits should have been alarming in their frequency, but Mikoto enjoyed having both Hyuuga girls around. She could hardly imagine what their lives would have been without a maternal figure to soften Hiashi's influence.

Still, the moniker was a new one. Perhaps one she would have put a stop to, had Hiashi not been present the first time Hanabi addressed her thus. The stoic man had simply pressed a kiss to her cheek and declared that it was fitting.

Mikoto could not imagine Fugaku approving, but…Fugaku was not around anymore. And she had to believe he would not want her to be alone. A widow and a widower, what could be more fitting.

“It fits.” She lifted her chin and smiled.

“It does.” Yoshino’s previous foul mood was nowhere in residence.

A few seconds later, an Aburame teen with short hair burst into the room.

“Torune?”

“Oba-san, have you seen my teammates?”

There was a slight pause.

“I suggest you begin your search in the den. Fū was there earlier with Itachi.”

“Thank you.”

Like a shadow, the boy disappeared back down the hallway.

“How are the boys doing?” Mikoto asked.

She remembered how about a month after Fugaku’s passing, the death of Shimura Danzo led to the discovery of some sort of militarized branch of ANBU that involved the recruitment of child soldiers. That boy Torune had been rescued and returned to the Aburame family. The Yamanaka and even the Nara had children returned to their care. It had been a joyous reunion, but also a huge blow to the clans.

“Being on a team with Shiranui Fū has been a boon to Torune.” Mitsuri’s insects hummed. “Her outgoing nature has been a great help in his rehabilitation. With Foo there as well, he perceives that he is not alone in his struggle.”

“I agree. Foo’s moods are becoming increasingly stable.” Mara threw in her two cents. “And through Fū, I believe the pair are slowly becoming closer with Itachi too.”

“You may be correct,” Mikoto admitted. “Itachi has spoken of them all on occasion. And Itachi himself has become more open in the last few years, though I would hardly call him an extrovert.”

“Nah, he’s still pretty much the same even after four years of exposure to Maito Gai! Your boy is resilient!”

There was another movement by the door and Ino appeared with an unfamiliar pink haired-girl and Hinata. The former looked

terrified.

"Onee-san!" Hanabi squawked angrily, hurling a pea at her sister. Hinata promptly caught it and popped it in her mouth.

"Thanks, Hanabi-chan."

"I want to walk on walls too!"

"I'll show you how this week, but no fits, Hanabi-chan." Mikoto shook a finger in her not-daughter's face and smiled when the pout melted. "Good."

"Alright." Tsume threw a chop of meat at an eager ninken. "What are you squirts up to? And who is that?"

Mikoto was curious about the unfamiliar face too. After a few years, knowing everyone on sight was a given. This pink-haired girl stuck out like a sore thumb, especially in her bright pink kimono.

"Haruno Sakura," the girl stuttered fearfully. "Kiba-san said I could come, but I guess…"

"If he invited ya, yer fine," Tsume declared finally, but eyed the other kids with a suspicious eye.

"Naruto wants to prank the dads," Ino said.

Mikoto bit her lip, but kept from laughing.

"What can we do to help?" Yoshino asked with a laugh.

"We need tea!" Hinata smirked. "Lots and lots of tea."

"Come back in fifteen minutes," Mikoto offered. "We'll have it ready for you."

"Thanks!" the two girls shouted while the shyer Sakura merely mumbled her thanks uncomfortably.

"Is Nee-san going to get in trouble?" Hanabi whispered uncertainly.

"No, little one. Your Otou-san is going to be quite put out, but he'll survive."

Even if my fledgling relationship doesn't.

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The sky was painted with a sea of colours as the sun began to set. Crickets chirped in the background above the steady and almost boisterous hum of conversation. Below, adults and young people were mingling. In their customary gathering atop the roof, a group of friends sat together, playing games and talking.

Minato grinned from his side of the shogi board, set over a worn quilt that Tsume had tossed at them for their picnic area. Opposite him, Shikamaru glowered grimly at the shogi pieces in front of him. Shikamaru had improved drastically over the years, but he still was not at Shikaku's level—or Minato's for that matter.

Minato shifted a bit, jostling Sasuke, who was using his thigh as a pillow.

"Sorry," Minato said. "My leg cramped a bit."

"Hmph."

As expected, Shikamaru finally moved one of his pieces into a position that would allow him to capture his queen on the next turn. Such a shame.

Grinning slightly, Minato casually leaned forward and moved his climbing silver into place—and waited.

It only took a moment for shock and outrage to cloud his friend's face, but the true triumph was the oddly sour twist of Shikamaru's lips.

"I could be wrong, but I think I win." Minato folded his hands under his chin and grinned broadly.

"As if you're ever wrong." Shikamaru rubbed his forehead tiredly. "I'm going to beat you one of these days, Minato."

"You will."

When that seemed to make Shikamaru scowl harder, Minato held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"I really do think you'll win someday! You're getting better and better. My progress is pretty stagnant."
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It really felt like that at times. He needed to do something to make more progress in his lessons. Minato knew he was doing incredibly well for someone his age, but it felt like he was getting nowhere lately, aside from expected landmark improvements in speed and taijutsu. He needed to do something to get out of this slump, even if he was the only one who viewed it as such.

“For being so smart, you’re kind of an idiot, Minato,” Sasuke muttered.

“It’s troublesome to agree with Sasuke about something like this, but you do push too hard,” Shikamaru grumbled. “You’re always making progress. Even when we’re having fun, it’s pretty obvious that we’re all getting something out of it.”

“I’m really feeling the love, guys.”

“Quit being so troublesome,” Shikamaru said before flopping onto his back and covering his eyes with the back of his arm.

Before coming back in time, Minato had never really considered what the next generation of Konoha shinobi would be like. Being among them now was a humbling experience. His friends were awesome. They were unique individuals, but reflected their familial traits. As the clans became closer, Minato could see monumental changes occurring as their bonds strengthened.

The Academy was already unrecognizable with Utatane’s implementation of placement exams. Minato could only imagine that altering the framework of the Academy would create a more successful learning environment. It had been his goal to create a better Academy too, but time had run out back then. It was nice to see that the Sandaime had seen that change was necessary now.

“Did you try to fudge your test results, Shikamaru?” Minato asked curiously.

“Of course he did.” Chouji dropped down cheerily with a tray of meats to feast on. No doubt he'd hijacked it before coming here.

“I said to stop being troublesome,” Shikamaru complained without any actual heat. “And I did, but it didn’t work out in my favour.”

“You tried to do badly on the tests?” Sasuke sat up at that.

“On purpose?”

Like a typical Nara, Shikamaru completely blew off the stink-eye that Sasuke was sending his way. Minato sensed an intervention would be prudent.

“How did they catch you?”

“My uncle was one of the proctors in my test room.”

Ouch. That would certainly throw a wrench in Shikamaru's plans.

“So, placement tests?” Minato asked.

“Kicked ass, of course!” Ino cut in exuberantly.

The Yamanaka had her arms linked with Hinata and a hesitant-looking girl in a far too formal red kimono. The girl from the other day, Sakura: Tsunade's apprentice from the not-future. They were walking next to Naruto, who was sniping back and forth with Kiba about one thing or another. Further back, Shino was hovering next to an agitated Neji.

“So, we’re talking placements?” Kiba butted into the conversation casually. The Inuzuka looked like his chin might have a bruise tomorrow, but was cheerful despite it. A quick glance toward Naruto confirmed the blond’s knuckles looked a bit sore, though that evidence was sure to vanish. His newfound cockiness was bound to last at least a week.

“We were about to discuss it, but I don’t recall inviting you, mutt!”

Minato just shook his head as Sasuke insulted the other boy. Honestly, the two got along better than most and it rather surprised him how snobbish he could be at times.

“You’re at my house, asshole!” Kiba snarked.

“Enough!” Hinata rounded on them, and everyone collectively shivered at her ire.

After a moment, her tone dropped into its typical refined cadence. “Good. I would like to hear about all of your placements.”

“Err…right,” Kiba muttered nervously, edging back slightly

to settle himself near Chouji and somewhat behind Sasuke. “I totally got advanced taijutsu!”

“Is that all?” Ino asked, smiling far too innocently. “I performed well enough in the written portion to get placed in an introductory encryption class. And I tested into a more advanced mathematics class!”

“I tested out of math so I guess that’s something.” Shikamaru yawned. “Makes for one less troublesome class to skip.”

“What!” Ino wailed, while Minato reached over and whispered a harsh warning that there would be no skipping class on his watch. “You tested out of a *core* class? That’s just…that isn’t fair!”

“I tested out too.”

Minato looked at that and found himself rather surprised by Sakura’s statement. Well, well.

“That is quite the accomplishment, Sakura-san.” Minato nodded thoughtfully, causing Sakura to flush. “That makes three of our group.”

“You too, Minato-chan?!” Naruto looked horribly jealous.

“Me too!”

Minato couldn’t help but laugh at Naruto’s dejection. Suddenly inspired, he leaned toward Naruto.

“Hey, you and I are taking fuinjutsu class together, right? That’s a special class.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me!” Naruto growled dramatically. “I still don’t see why Jiji cares if I learn about seals. I get that it's useful and all, but I’ll leave that boring crap to you! Sasuke and I are gonna take down our opponents, dattebayo!”

"Take that, Minato-baka! Dattebane!"

Minato’s lips quirked.

“Idiot. As if they are going to put you two on the same team,” Shikamaru whispered under his breath.

It was unfortunate, but Minato knew Shikamaru was likely

correct. Jinchuuriki were village assets. Placing two of them together on a team—no matter how praiseworthy the teamwork—was not about to happen. It would be difficult not being placed with Naruto, but Minato knew he could still help him. An introduction to his bijuu would not be necessary for some time yet.

Thankfully, Naruto seemed oblivious to Shikamaru's little statement, delaying *that* particular conversation.

Shino wandered up out of nowhere like a lost wraith and seated himself next to Neji.

"I have heard you will be joining us in the medic class at the hospital, Minato-kun."

Overcome with frustration, Minato slumped forward glumly and sighed.

"Of course, I will," he said heavily. "While Oba-san has resigned herself to the fact that I refuse to dedicate myself to healing, she still wants me to master basic medicinal principles. I think this is another underhanded method of motivating me."

"No knowledge is useless."

"You're right." Minato knew it even if he sometimes felt like it was a waste of his energy. "I'll never become the medic that you're going to be, though."

"Combat medic," Shino agreed gravely. "My taijutsu exceeds the expectations of my clan, though I regretfully find myself unable to surpass Neji's prowess in the field."

"I'm a year older *and* the Hyuuga specialize in taijutsu." Neji's voice dragged and his eyes kept blinking in an almost jittery manner. "Many call me a genius for my skills, but as an Aburame, your talents are well above satisfactory. And I have noticed your improvement. Up until now, few aside from myself can keep up with you in spars."

"Are you alright, Neji?" Minato knew his voice betrayed his concern.

"I'm well, thank you." The Hyuuga straightened his spine and smiled wanly. "Nazari was up early and I got up with her to allow Maiko-san some rest. I noticed she has been exhausted lately, so it was

no trouble to spend some extra time with my sister."

The Hyuuga-Uchiha baby had been a huge source of debate well before her birth. In the end, Hizashi had been triumphant when Nazari was born without a Byakugan and saved the burden of the Caged Bird Seal. Uchiha Maiko—while far from the formidable woman Mikoto was—had already threatened anyone that laid a finger on her child. Since then, the couple had moved into the village proper outside their respective clans' lands. It was considered scandalous, but since the clan heads refused to act on it, people were slowly becoming accustomed to the change.

"Guys!" Naruto materialized in their midst, scattering shogi pieces to the winds and startling the group.

"Gah!" A trio of fists from the femme fatale struck home. Naruto was instantly familiarized with the taste of shingles and roof moss.

"Ugh...what was that for, you guys?"

There was a snap of a picture being taken. Kiba stared into the lens of a camera with a hearty chuckle.

"Fucking priceless, man!"

"Sorry, Naruto-san!"

Sakura was staring at her fist in horror, but Ino quickly laughed and put a calming hand on her shoulder.

"Meh, he's got a hard head. No worries, Sakura."

Minato stepped over a few limbs and helped drag a groaning Naruto to his feet, even taking a second to kindly brush some dust off his whiskered cheeks.

"There, mostly good!"

"Ugh…all I wanted to do was set up a prank for the adults."

The camera vanished and Kiba put his hands out and licked his lips. "Hell yeah! Let's get 'em! I've helped Naruto pull some pretty awesome things around the village, but we haven't gotten our folks since that underwear incident!"

"Prank?" Sasuke sat up abruptly, suddenly keen.

“Underwear incident?” Sakura asked, looking lost.

“Ooh, yeah!” Ino shot up with a sparkle. “That was the best! What did you have in mind, Naruto?”

“I’m not pranking my mom.” Shikamaru put his foot down wisely. “That won’t end well for me and I can tell you right now that Kiba would probably be skinned if he pulled one on his mom.”

“Err…yeah, that is probably very true.” Kiba shifted uneasily.

“If my father cannot perceive a threat, he deserves his fate,” Shino remarked gravely.

“I’m fine with it, but whatever you’re thinking, leave Maiko-san and my sister out of it.” Neji’s eyes flashed and Minato caught a glimpse of glowing chakra in Neji’s palm before it dispersed harmlessly.

“You got it, Neji!” Naruto was back on his feet, boisterous as ever.

“So, what’s the plan?” Hinata asked.

Naruto’s eyes twinkled as he pulled out a bag and began a detailed explanation of what he needed.

“Us girls will set up the first part,” Ino insisted, grabbing Hinata and Sakura and dragging them toward the edge of the roof. “You guys plan out how we’re going to trick them.”

Naruto pulled out his bag and immediately Kiba and Naruto began unscrewing caps.

“I’ll plan it out. Subtlety really isn’t in your skillset, Naruto.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Naruto agreed.

“Alright, what are you guys up to now?” a voice called from above.

Minato looked up and shot to his feet, not quite ready to believe what he was seeing.

“Fū!” Naruto shouted.

‘*Kurama, is that…?’*

‘***It is. Only a jinchuuriki working with their bijuu can accessthose abilities. Fū has forged a partnership with Choumei. Chakra is one thing, but those wings would be impossible to use without an agreement or friendship between the pair.’***

‘*Would the village know that?’* It was a legitimate concern.

‘***I doubt it. They have heard tales about jinchuuriki transforming and using their powers. Konoha has had me with them since their founding, but they know precious little about the abilities of other jinchuuriki. I imagine the Hokage will merely see this as an extension of jinchuuriki training rather than consider Fū’s relationship with her bijuu. That works to our advantage anyway.’***

‘*I think we should talk to both of them together sometime. It might be worth it. I trust Fū. And you trust Choumei. And…I trust you most of all.’*

‘***Maybe. I’ll think about it.’***

“Isn’t it awesome?!” Fū chirped as she descended to the rooftop. The boys—including the ever-lazy Shikamaru—instantly surrounded the pig-tailed kunoichi. “I got to try it with my team the other day!”

Neji was studying her with his Byakugan while Shino was practically vibrating with insect activity. Naruto looked ready to explode with excitement, to the point that Shikamaru and Chouji both had a restraining arm on either side of him.

“Teach me that! Please, Fū! Please teach me that!” Naruto fell to his knees, his eyes burning with the zeal of a worshipper beseeching his goddess. “I’ll give you ANYTHING! Just teach me to fly!”

“Eh?” Fū scratched her cheek and tapped her sandal with a chagrined look. “I’m sorry, Naruto-kun. But I can only do this because of…well…”

Fū pressed her hand to her abdomen and smiled apologetically when Naruto looked absolutely crestfallen.

Minato stepped around Naruto and gave the older girl a light hug, which she returned.

“Congratulations,” he whispered quietly, his words just for Fū. “I think we both know what an accomplishment this is for you.”

“Thank you, Minato-kun!” Fū laughed brightly.

“Meh, wings or not, we’re still gonna kick all of your asses!” Kiba boasted.

“That’s right!” Naruto agreed.

“Oh yeah, guess we’ll see! Catch me if you can…and if you prank me, I’m not hanging out with you for a month!”

“Ah, fine!” Naruto screeched, before lowering his voice. “Just…watch what you drink.”

“Gotcha!” Fū said as she took off. “Gonna go hang with Itachi and my boys! Laters!”

Sasuke sidled up to his elbow, his stare jumping from Fū’s wings to Minato’s back. He was obviously trying to work something out.

“I’m not going to grow wings,” Minato said, suppressing a grin when Sasuke’s face coloured. “My bijuu doesn’t have them so I can’t really hope to manifest them.”

“You don’t really talk about it much,” Sasuke commented. “About you being a jinchuuriki.”

“Not sure what to say, really,” Minato said faintly. “It’s part of me, but it isn’t something that just anyone can understand. You’ll remember that the villagers still don’t treat Naruto very well.”

Sasuke growled at that.

“Can you imagine how they would be if they knew there were *three* monsters in their midst?”

“Don’t call yourself that,” Sasuke spat harshly. “Fū is Itachi’s friend, and you and Naruto are…”

Sasuke trailed off, but Minato saw the flash of red in Sasuke’s eyes as the Sharingan briefly appeared before vanishing again.

“We’re important to you,” Minato finished what Sasuke

would not—could not—say. “You’re important to us, too. But try not to let it bother you.”

For an instant, Minato felt Sasuke’s chakra bubble uncertainly before it settled.

“Losing my father was hard, Minato. I’m not as mad as I used to be, but I still hate Kumo. I hate them for what they did to me. To us. But I know that losing Kaa-san, Naruto, Itachi, or you…I couldn’t deal with that.”

Sometimes there were no easy answers. Minato was no therapist and for all of his experience, he did not always say the right things. No matter how much he tried, he was never as good as he should have been.

Instead, he grabbed his friend’s hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. The gesture was returned after a breath and a dozen heartbeats.

“Be angry with Kumo, but don’t let it win, okay?” Minato said. “Now let’s go have some fun. Naruto always comes up with some pretty fun ideas.”

A pause.

“He does…Even if he drives me crazy, no one makes me laugh like him.”

“Yeah...Let’s go.”

Minato tugged Sasuke forward and the pair of them dropped down to whisper with each other and exchange looks.

“What now?” Kiba asked.

“Let’s go see if the girls got what we needed.”

Sure enough, it took a little time, but the girls were soon carrying trays of steaming baked goods while the boys handled the tea. The girls said they had been asked to bring out the dessert cakes.

As Shikamaru anticipated, the food was treated with suspicion by the majority of the adults. Certainly, Inoichi smiled and thanked his daughter profusely, but he eyed his seed cake as if it were a faulty exploding tag.

Itachi, sitting with Fū, was staring down his nose at all of them. When he finally reached him, Minato held his hands up innocently and was met by an Uchiha-style “Hn” for his troubles.

Fū put an end to the whispers after scarfing down two of the little cakes in quick succession before flopping onto the ground with her feet in Torune’s lap, the rest of her sprawled across Foo.

In order to make things less suspicious, the kids began eating from the communal tray before flinging themselves to the ground near the table to converse—and to have a good seat for the show—and waited. Though Minato did spy Neji checking on his infant sibling while serving Maiko a cup of pure tea.

Wisely, Minato sauntered up to where Tsunade was and asked her how her game was proceeding. Naturally, she was losing horribly, but her temper subsided when Minato diverted her by climbing into the chair next to her.

Seeing that the world had not ended, the adults carefully began nibbling on the cakes. When that proved safe, they took longer and longer sips of tea before finally settling down.

A few minutes later, conversation halted abruptly. Shikaku was the only adult that had been spared—the Nara were notoriously lazy, but they were damn sharp.

“What is this?!” Hiashi was standing, fumbling around for a non-existent mirror before emptying the last dregs of black-coloured tea into the dirt.

“Err…” Chouza’s massive tongue was sticking outside his mouth, entirely black.

“Minato?” Tsunade asked with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I made sure they didn’t get you,” he assured her.

The danger melted into pride as she squished him against her bosom tightly.

“That’s my boy!” Minato sighed in relief as he was squeezed enviably close—to certain male perverts—against Tsunade’s body.

“Ino! How could you?!” Inoichi screeched, dabbing a

napkin against his black-stained teeth.

"Humph, some information-gathering expert you are, Tou-san!" Ino fell back, laughing hysterically.

"Uzumaki Naruto!"

Minato grimaced as Hyuuga Hiashi towered over Naruto, who had tears streaming down his face he was laughing so hard. But as soon as he realized he had been confronted, Naruto was on his feet pointing menacingly at the enraged clan leader.

"That's for dating my Kaa-san! Hinata-chan and Hanabi-chan are awesome, but you just want to see my Kaa-san naked! I saw you in her room the other night, perv!"

With that little declaration, Naruto chucked a cup full of tea at the gobsmacked Hyuuga. Hiashi—as a jounin—blocked it, but the cup shattered on impact and sent tea and the ink inside all over his formal white kimono.

Naruto continued to unwisely gloat after the fact. "HA! Take that, asshat! Don't ever touch my Kaa-san's boobs again! The pranks will only escalate from here on out!"

"WHAT?!" Sasuke exploded violently. Thankfully, he was grabbed before he could launch himself at Hiashi. "I'll *kill* you...Itachi, let go!"

Minato's eyes widened as the adults with their ink-stained teeth quieted and stared at the open-mouthed, red-faced Hyuuga Hiashi...who looked ready to erupt at any given moment.

"Run, Naruto! RUN!" Minato shrieked unabashedly.

Apparently, the blond must have taken the hint because he suddenly realized that Hiashi was running at him. Thankfully, Naruto was quick on his feet and was soon racing up and over the Inuzuka compound with Hiashi hot on his heels.

All around them, Inuzuka ninken began baying from the excitement of a chase and even some of the trained ninken began racing up the walls in pursuit of the pair—to what end, no one knew.

"…Did that just happen?" Minato asked, not sure who he was addressing at this point.

“And I think it’s time for us to go home,” Tsunade declared, tossing him over her shoulder like a sack of rice. “Good timing on that prank. We can sneak out of here and I don’t have to help clean up.”

Minato pretended not to notice how Tsunade’s chest was heaving with restrained laughter.

“Maybe you and I could pull that on Tenzo sometime,” Minato whispered in her ear. “Wouldn’t want him to forget the consequences of pulling a fast one on Nee-chan.”

“Perhaps.” Tsunade’s voice was full of laughter. “For now, let’s skedaddle. You know I hate dishes.”

“Ah, I do know.”

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Sarutobi Hiruzen was smiling as he read a missive from Jiraiya. Apparently, he should expect a new volume of Icha Icha soon. What a treat.

Palming his pipe, the Hokage absently reached for the crystal ball in his drawer and plunked it on his desk. His gut told him that something interesting was afoot.

Before he had time to activate it, there was a shriek at his window and Uzumaki Naruto came tumbling inside, darting toward him at breakneck speed.

“Jiji! Help me!”

Hiruzen groaned. There went all his free time tonight. He just couldn’t get a single night off, could he...

“Naruto, what have you done now?” Hiruzen asked, just as Hyuuga Hiashi, splattered in black—was that ink?—popped into view, flashing teeth that were definitely stained black.

“Help me,” Naruto moaned piteously.

“I think I get the picture,” Hiruzen declared finally before lifting his surrogate grandchild and disappearing in a poof of smoke.

Naturally, he left behind a Kage Bunshin to confront Hiashi, but some problems needed a deft hand.
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“Do I want to ask why?”

“Asshole had it coming. He was touching my mom’s boobs.”

Nice.

Surreptitiously wiping away the blood trickling from his nose, Hiruzen reappeared at Naruto’s favourite ramen stand and stepped beneath the tarp.

“Tell me all about it over ramen, Naruto-kun?”

Naruto lit up like the sun.

“RAMEN!”

Chapter End Notes

So! If you notice a difference in bijuu conversation, my beta reader and I are discussing a format change. So, don't be too alarmed!

To those who made requests: I'll do my best! The Academy timeskip is four chapters and that leaves a lot of room to work things in.

Lastly, I want you to know how very much you all mean to me. Feedback from you guys really makes all the effort I put into this story worth it. Thank you all for giving my story a chance!

Chapter 16: Accidents Happen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It surprised Shisui, how quickly he became accustomed to dank, grungy pubs in backwater villages. Whether it was densely populated towns or distant travellers' vistas; from the arid dunes of Suna to the snowy peaks of Kumo, very little differentiated people. Whether clothing was fine or threadbare, it all reeked of smoke and cheap pub ale. The level of cleanliness and upkeep might vary from venue to venue, but all in all, these places were pretty much the same.

The Blue Shrimp Inn is just another shady destination packed with vagrants, the most questionable of the locals, and travellers misfortunate enough to wander in without considering exactly what sort of establishment they were approaching.

Uchiha Shisui would not be the sort of customer expected at such a destination. But someone with Shisui's precision with genjutsu hardly needed to blend in. A potent but nigh undetectable genjutsu cloaked his appearance better than any mask. Shisui was simply another gaunt-faced youth, just trying to survive Kiri's war.

Lifting his drink to keep with the illusion he crafted, Shisui nodded encouragingly to one of Yagura's deserters answering his questions in a glazed, rambling manner. The man had not offered much in the way of useful intel, but Shisui was patiently fishing until he was sure that every last tidbit of information had been gleaned.

"I can see why you're getting out of here," Shisui placated his target with an earnest smile, subtly reinforcing it with a gentle nudge with his dojutsu. "It really sounds like Yagura went off the deep end. I'm glad I'm not a shinobi. I wouldn't have lasted a day!"

"True that, friend! Glad you can see my point." The poor man looked absolutely relieved someone was supporting him instead of condemning his desertion, that it never occurred to him to worry about *why* he felt so comfortable. "Of course, it weren't always like that, but eh, that monster in his head probably set 'im off. Believe it or not, I was a chunin for ten years."

"For real? You must be really strong!" Shisui praised the other

man liberally and was satisfied by the pleased, drunken flush cresting the man's face. "I'll bet you have a tale or two to tell! I've never done anything so exciting. Share some stories with me?"

Shisui almost lazily managed the conversation; his Sharingan mapped the comings and goings in the room, while he responded appropriately to the man he was extracting information from. So far, he had discovered very little of value, but information gathering was a precise art that required a subtle hand and a significant amount of patience.

Finally, Shisui excused himself from his companion who merely nodded dumbly and shuffled off to a nearby gambling table. Shisui was ready to leave when the door swung wide and he redirected his movements to a stool near the bar and plopped down.

Of course, that was when his luck had to change. An exhausted threesome that were mud splattered and looked like they had survived a recent skirmish or two and were looking for a place to lie low. Rebels against Yagura then. Something Shisui could privately applaud, even if the civil war was something of a boon to Konoha.

Shisui was confident than his genjutsu abilities could hold against just about anyone. Even most Kage would be hard-pressed to recognize his talents. And sure enough, a youngster with glasses that might have been Itachi's age now or a few years shy. Behind him one older man and someone closer to his own age. One with dark hair and compelling gold eyes, that might have made Shisui give him a second look under different circumstances. But the senior, former hunter-nin of Kiri staring right through his genjutsu with an outraged look capable of spitting nails.

Byakugan Ao: dojutsu thief. Shisui flashed a strained smile and waved semi-mockingly toward the man that looked undecided between dragging his companions away or attacking him. Shisui sorely hoped he did not decide on the latter option, it would blow his cover completely and Jiraiya-sensei would be oh so disappointed.

"You! Leaf scum!" The hunter nin groused hatefully!

Shisui's chakra spiked and he felt a minor flare of annoyance that he was forced to cover up Ao's muck up with a more powerful mind-affecting genjutsu that he settled over the entire room.

"Knock it off, can't you see I'm trying not to attract attention," Shisui complained mournfully as he leaned against the countertop and

eyed the trio lazily.

"Ao-san, what's wrong?" The shark-toothed youngster piped up with that bit of squeakiness that indicated puberty had not hit yet.

"Ah, an Uchiha then?" The man that may have been only a year or two his senior stated calmly, his burnished gold eyes focusing on him carefully, but not exactly fearfully as he looked beyond the genjutsu and straight into his Sharingan. "I would assume if he were looking for us, he would not be behaving so casually. Ao, don't make a scene. You know *she* won't like that."

The older shinobi seemed to bristle at that, but his stance shifted to a more defensive nature rather than overtly offensive. Shisui decided to take it as the olive branch it might be.

"Since we're not enemies today, would you care to join me for a drink?" Shisui tossed the suggestion out there with a broad, easy smile and a lazy wink. "I'm all for company, how about you, Ao-san? Trade you for information?"

"Absolutely not!" Ao retorted thunderously.

Honestly, that guy made things too easy. The little kid inside Shisui was unable to resist waggling his fingers teasingly in the other man's direction. Sure enough, the hunter-nin jerked and growled threateningly, only to be restrained by the dark-haired male with the loose-fitting kimono who stared at him with a critical gaze.

"Perhaps," a low, even voice made the flesh along Shisui's neck prickle and he found himself nodding mechanically. "If you return the favour."

Damn, that's a sexy voice. Today is looking up for me!

It seemed this was a night for information, after all. And, as always, the best information came from what was not said. Even without Jiraiya's extensive drilling of important people to remember, Shisui would have realized something was up just from how the Kiri trio positioned themselves. Ao had begrudgingly taken up a seat next to Shisui, while the dark haired individual—one of Kiri's not so missing jinchuuriki—slid into place on Ao's other side leaving the kid with the glasses to scramble up next to him.

In this particular scenario, Shisui assumed he would win more points by offering something up.

“Utakata, right?” Shisui felt unnecessarily smug when those golden eyes narrowed slightly and Ao tensed up. “It’s just…your picture doesn’t really do you justice. Your eyes are much lovelier in person!”

Shisui took a distinct pleasure in watching Ao’s face purple and Utakata stare him down passively, while the youngster just looked adorably confused.

“Picture?” The kid asked queerly. “Like, the Bingo Book?”

“Bingo!” Shisui shot the kid a thumb’s up and bit his lip to prevent the snort escaping when Ao slammed his palms on the table.

“What are we doing?! We shouldn’t be consorting with the enemy!” Ao hissed narrowly.

“I thought your enemy was Yagura,” Shisui commented, twisting his words with confusion just to see if Ao would explode from the prod.

“And you’re just a spy that is probably gathering intel to hit us while we’re down!”

“I could be,” Shisui drawled, aware of how the trio immediately stiffened. Resolutely, Shisui stirred his beverage and popped a grape into his mouth smoothly. “But I’m not.”

“Nothing you say is trustworthy,” Ao growled. “And don’t try anything! I’m watching you, Uchiha! I’m not about to let you pull anything the way you guys did with the Mizukage.”

Forget gold. This was like discovering a plot of chakra metal.

“Look, I heard your Kage went insane…but I really don’t see how that’s my fault,” he defended himself carefully and allowing some genuine honesty to touch his words. “I’m definitely in Kiri, for reasons that should be rather obvious, if you actually put some thought into it. Still, it’s nothing to do with you guys. Not really.”

Not directly anyhow.

Ao looked ready to come back with something nasty, but Utakata at least seemed thoughtful instead of reactive.

“If that’s true, I’m sure it would put everyone at ease if you

simply gave us an explanation," a woman's voice that surely would have inspired his sensei's dirtiest fantasies called out from the stool next to him.

Ao was instantly on his feet, while the other two simply relaxed and directed their attention to the newcomer.

Terumi Mei was even more attractive in person than her Bingo Book image led a person to believe with a commanding, feminine stance. Behind her, was a pale youth with snow-white hair, green eyes, and markings from the apparently-not-so-extinct Kaguya Clan.

"Mei-sama! I fear it's no longer safe to remain here. Let me escort you to safety!"

Even Shisui shivered at the sudden flash of killing intent that washed over their little group. Somehow, Ao seemed not to notice until Mei rounded on him with a murderous smile.

"Ao."

"Yes?!"

"Shut up…or I'll kill you!"

An unhealthy dose of admiration flooded for the murderous female, had Shisui grinning beatifically, while the Byakugan-thief looked prepared to piss his drawers in fear. Across the way, Utakata seemed more amused by the display and Chojuro merely sighed over his plate of questionable quality food that a genjutsu-drugged waitress had brought him.

"Mei-sama?" The Kaguya boy stated from beside the auburn beauty.

"Go sit with Chojuro, Kimimaro-kun." The auburn haired, S-rank threat ruffled the white hair fondly as she turned her attention to him and smiled wickedly. "I'll sit next to this handsome young man and hear what he has to say."

"Yes, Mei-sama."

The Kaguya boy slid into place next to the other boy without further comment and began eating his own plate of food that Shisui's waitress deposited with glazed eyes.

Okay, then. Shisui had felt absolutely confident in his abilities to handle the situation prior to thirty seconds ago. He would be a liar if he was not a little more concerned with Mei's arrival. Sure, he had some trump cards to fall back on, but it would be better if he could get out of this without a fight.

"Now, perhaps you could share your name with me?" Terumi Mei purred softly, blue fingernails dragging over the back of his wrist in a manner both seductive and deadly all at the same time. "And tell me what you're doing in such a quaint, little village."

Up until today, Shisui had been understanding, but perhaps not entirely thankful for Jiraiya's insistence upon lessons in the flesh. Now they came in handy, when Shisui was able to return a playful smile without a blush ambushing him. It was a simple matter to turn in his seat, drop his elbow onto the counter, and give Ao his back. Not only was it a show of confidence that Mei would be unable to dismiss, but it had the added bonus of pissing off the seasoned hunter-nin.

"I'm an open book, Terumi-san," Shisui winked to soothe the damage of the obvious lie. "Unless, of course, you want to know about village secrets or something of that nature. I'm sure, that you can appreciate how some information is best kept quiet. I'm Uchiha Shisui —but you already knew that."

"Huh, as clever as he is handsome," Mei remarked poisonously. "Very well, Shisui-kun. Tell me what brings you to Kiri. And no lies now!"

"This and that," Shisui replied evasively, but followed up quickly as Mei's eyes narrowed. "But tracking down Orochimaru would be my priority."

Electric blue fingernails twirled a bit of auburn hair and Shisui realized he was being sized up and evaluated. It was not lost on him that the green eyes flicked toward Ao—no doubt doublechecking dojutsu activation—before Mei sighed heavily.

"Orochimaru was sighted a few weeks back, but my scouts merely tracked his movements from a distance and did not pursue when he did not engage our forces. I'm afraid that any trail you're hoping to pick up is long cold, by now."

"Snakes are elusive, but they can't hide forever," Shisui said.

"And what other reason are you here, Uchiha?"

“Rumors are dangerous things,” Shisui murmured, ignoring the drink the bartender offered him, while absently pressing a few coins into the man’s hand. “But sometimes answers are worth more than the danger.”

“Oh?” Mei leaned forward. “And what sort of answers are you seeking?”

“Survivors from Uzushio,” Shisui spoke the truth, noticing the shock resonating from Mei and the murmurs from her companions behind him. “We have, shall we say it…evidence that there had been a large group that survived the purges. It seemed obvious to look for that truth in a country sharing its affinity with the sea.”

“You’ll find no such answers in Kiri,” Mei replied after a moment. A lie? No…a half-truth. “But I will tell you that the definition of kekkei genkai has become rather loose of late among the loyalist faction.”

“I see,” Shisui understood the implication quite well—and really, Jiraiya and Shisui had suspected and had that confirmed a few dozen times over. “I suppose that settles that matter. I really ought to hit the road.”

Shisui stood, with confidence more false than real, and shrugged on a heavy, black travelling cloak.

“Going so soon?” Mei’s icy voice teased his ears. “I hadn’t given you permission to leave.”

“I am,” Shisui said, pausing and mulling another matter over before speaking. “If I were you, I’d finish eating and make yourselves scarce.”

“And why is that, Uchiha?” Ao seized the opportunity to reinsert himself into the conversation.

“Because while I was gathering information in this hellhole, one of the forward scouts from Yagura’s forces spilled his guts to me. This village will be completely swarmed with loyalists if they don’t raze it to the ground.”

“You’re lying!” Ao accused.

“Why would I lie?” Shisui locked eyes with Terumi Mei, shrugging his shoulders and speaking quietly. “Konoha has no reason

to support Yagura. You might be surprised what happens if you made a request for assistance from the right people."

A seed of consideration and reluctant admiration had taken root in Mei's eyes. Shisui gambled and offered a curt nod of respect that was acknowledged by the kunoichi who gave the barest inclination of her chin.

"Ao, we're leaving. Help Kimimaro and Chojuro!" Mei called sharply. "Beware, little Uchiha. The next time we meet, I may not allow you to get away so easily."

"Flattery will get you anywhere, Mei!" Shisui grinned, his Sharingan lifting the genjutsu fog hanging over the pub. "Goodbye."

"Wait," Utakata's soft voice called out.

"Hmm?"

Shisui turned again and was taken aback by the conviction coupled with a grimace on the taller man's face.

"I require only a moment of your time," Utakata replied while folding his arms quietly.

Ao looked like he intended to interject, but Mei cut him off with a sharp look, while the two young boys clustered around Mei uneasily.

"By all means, Utakata-san," Shisui replied.

"Like yourself, I have no intention of betraying my comrades, but I feel compelled to offer you a warning. Not for the sake of Konoha, but because I know you have three like myself in your village. All younger."

Okay, that was outrageously dangerous information. Of the like that Jiraiya and Shisui had painstakingly worked to handle. Taki's jinchuuriki had vanished without a trace and Konoha preferred to keep it that way for the time being. And Senju Minato…only a privileged few had access to that information. For some backwater rebels from Taki to be aware that Konoha had not one, but three jinchuuriki, that was news to him.

Except…Shisui's Sharingan picked up the micro-expressions that he otherwise would have dismissed. Ao and Mei appeared just as

surprised as Shisui was minus the alarm, though that may come with time.

"You're misinformed," Shisui denied flatly, not missing the relief surge onto Ao's face.

"I am not," the jinchuuriki smiled slightly before patting his abdomen in a telling fashion. "My source is indisputable. But that's not really the point. All I ask is that you make sure that they are ready. I don't think it will happen right away, but there is an enemy coming for us. Please, make sure they're ready."

Well, then. Fuck me.

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"Damn it." Shisui swore.

It had taken him a few days to get the hell out of Kiri and hightail it to the Land of Hot Water for a visit to the hot springs. Of course, finding Jiraiya-sensei was never as easy as it should be since the man was prone to extensive 'research' trips.

Many of his usual haunts were empty. Shisui had been to every brothel in town and come up short. His clone had bravely checked every peeping area near the springs with no success. The bookshop and the gambling dens were a no-go too.

For a split second, he considered the possibility that Jiraiya had not arrived before instantly discarding that notion. A lecherous pervert his sensei might be, but when it came right down to it, Jiraiya did not shirk his duties.

So, where the hell was he then?

Shisui found Jiraiya in the last place he could possibly look: his room at the inn. Sure enough, the old perv was smoking a pipe, while reclining against a cushion, looking like he hadn't a care in the world.

Shisui's self-control fell apart and he stumbled into the room panting heavily and lifted an accusing finger toward his seemingly bemused Sensei.

"What the hell are you doing, Sensei? I haven't slept in over three days and when I finally get here, I can't find you anywhere!"
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“You do know you’re a pretty shitty spymaster if you can’t even find me in our hotel room,” Jiraiya had returned to the pages in his hands with a lecherous giggle.

“Ack, I’m too tired for this,” Shisui moaned, digging his fingers into his dirty hair. “And technically, I’m just your apprentice. So, get off my back, Sensei.”

The carpet was clean but threadbare and did not do his knees many favours, but it was easy enough for Shisui to flop down onto his side.

“I didn’t expect you for another day,” Jiraiya called to him casually. “Tell me what you learned.”

Shisui moaned but began reciting the list of information. Jiraiya listened patiently and only interrupted to ask the occasional question or point out potential errors in Shisui’s methodology.

“Well, when I assigned this to you, I definitely wasn’t expecting that. And you may be S-rank material kid, but Terumi Mei probably would have wiped the floor with you even with those fancy eyes of yours. You could have handled the jinchuuriki, but I’m starting to think letting you fly solo wasn’t such a good idea.”

“We learned a lot though. Even if we didn’t really find out much about the Uzumaki or Orochimaru, the information was worth sacrificing my position a bit.”

“Heh, maybe,” Jiraiya muttered, definitely unconvinced. “I’ll have to send word to Konoha that Kiri knows about our kids. That is our biggest concern. We’ll discuss this again when you’re more coherent.”

Shisui had almost drifted off—not even the threat of rugburn deterring his drooping eyelids. But the damnable rustling from paper being shuffled drew Shisui’s bleary attention. Jiraiya-sensei had his hands folded under his chin with an almost-smirk on his lips, but a painfully serious look in his eye.

“Something wrong?” Shisui grunted.

“You’ve worked hard, brat,” Jiraiya spoke meaningfully and Shisui found the sudden itch beneath his skin subsiding with the attention—at last. “These last few years have been enlightening in a number of ways. But the past few months have been even more

revealing. On days when you should have dropped from exhaustion after the training I put you through, you got up and worked through the night to prove your point."

Shisui swallowed reflexively, wanting to say something, *anything* to just put him out of his misery at this point. And get him to sleep.

"Honestly, your clan has so many stuffy, high-handed pricks that I never had much hope for you."

Shisui bit his lip and sat up, finding it awkward since his latest growth spurt made him more arms and legs than was normal.

"But…" Jiraiya sadistically let the word hang and Shisui vindictively vowed to string up his lecherous master the next time he had to drag his Sensei out of a brothel. "You did it! I'm proud of you! You truly are one of my favourite students!"

"Really?" Shisui asked faintly, feeling disoriented and concerned he really had gone off the deep end this time.

Wait a minute…what the hell is he on about?

"Congratulations, kid!"

The Sannin shot forward, kicking the desk to the side, and swooping Shisui into a headlock before aggressively rubbing at his scalp.

"Ack! Sensei! Let go!"

"To think," Jiraiya shouted out delightedly. "I always thought this day would never come, but my patience has rewarded me! Truly a disciple after my own heart!"

"Wait just a damn minute!" Shisui wiggled desperately as his suspicions hit him hard. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't play coy with me, kid. I found it!"

"What?" Shisui asked stupidly, before the lecherous look on Jiraiya's face answered his own question.

Oh shit. Oh no. Oh, crap! I am so, so dead.

"I mean, honestly, you've never bothered sealing *anything*

before. You might as well have posted a sign."

Oh, Kami! This can't be happening.

Unfortunately, not even wishful thinking—or a layered genjutsu—had the influence to stop Jiraiya when he was on a roll.

"But actually, it's fucking brilliant kid! You should have told me you had written a book! And the material, it's a little demure, but its got some smokin' hot descriptions! I knew that Sharingan had to be good for something because that detail is pure gold, kid! I sent a letter to my publisher yesterday along with a copy of your work! I guarantee that we will have this baby in stores before we make it back to Konoha!"

No way. Not in a million years. Shisui's clan would absolutely destroy him if he was associated with that!

"It's just a dumb idea of mine! It's not a book!" Shisui squawked. "I don't want any credit for that! Do you know what my family will do if they find out I co-authored a book with you?!"

Already, he could picture himself being strung up and burned alive by an irate Mikoto. After he was nicely singed, a menacing hoard of kiddies would ambush him and smash sticky, squishy globs of gum into his attractively regrown hair.

Shisui shivered and curled up tighter.

"Believe me, kid, life is too short to be worried about a few fussy, traditionalists. Besides, a mind that can come up with this sort of material is wasted on propriety."

Smug satisfaction was not uncommon to see on Jiraiya's face, but having it aimed in his direction made Shisui question more than a few life decisions.

"Do we have to publish my book?" Shisui asked, knowing already that it was a lost cause.

"You almost sound like you'd prefer not to make a boatload of easy money," Jiraiya drawled and Shisui sighed heavily when the older man rolled his eyes. "Besides, I just finished adding a few scenes and buffing up the content so that it fits in with the rest of the series."

"Great…my romance story has turned into just another crappy

smut show," Shisui grumbled.

"Don't insult our work!" Jiraiya shouted, causing his ears to deafen slightly on one side. "A collaboration between master and pupil! I titled it: Icha Icha Combo!"

Assuming this was not some horrifying dream, Shisui could only assume his life really, actually *was* a nightmare.

"Your titles suck, Sensei," Shisui groaned pathetically into his hands. "But if you agree not to peek or do any of your whoremongering until we get back to Konoha, I'll let you publish it."

There was a long pause as Jiraiya's jubilation fell away and the older man studied him wordlessly. Without looking away, Shisui kept his gaze locked with his master.

Maybe it was selfish, but Shisui had really enjoyed being away from Konoha. Unless it was for a mission, he had never been outside the village. There was a certain appeal in being able to wake up and decide your own destiny: beholden to none. It was a way of life that was beautiful and certainly wouldn't last forever.

It was obvious that Jiraiya had initially been less than enthusiastic about taking him as a pupil, but Shisui liked to think his Sensei had warmed up over the years. Jiraiya taught him, but the man preferred sneaking away to brothels than hanging out with Shisui. Unfortunately for the sage, Shisui was a good stalker and dogged his footsteps day and night until slowly but surely, the older man warmed up to him and they actually spent a significant portion of time training.

Shisui's father had died long ago, but Jiraiya became something of a surrogate role even if it had not been the other man's intention. Around nighttime campfires they discussed jutsu theory and fuinjutsu—or listened to Jiraiya complain about how hopeless Shisui was. There were taijutsu spars that reminded him just how far the climb from A to S-rank really was. And there were lessons in the cities that Jiraiya taught him how to blend in and draw out potential informants and all that entailed.

It was far from a traditional parental relationship, but Shisui liked it. And as their time together drew near an end, Shisui had worked on the manuscript on the odd night that he was not completely exhausted. Unlike Jiraiya's writing, Shisui's work was tasteful, and focused largely on story, while still holding true to the

erotic draw that Jiraiya's readers preferred. Writing was no natural talent for him, his hard work slaving away was a small price to pay for more quality time with the man he had grown to care for so deeply.

"Alright, Shisui, you have a deal." Jiraiya's voice had gentled and there was promise in those words that might have been unbelievable otherwise. "Besides, I'll need all the time I can get to pound some extra information into that skull of yours. You've come far, but Jiraiya-sama still has plenty more to share with you!"

Feeling slightly less weary and dejected than he had five minutes prior, Shisui grinned slightly.

"Bring it, Sensei."

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School days settled into a comfortable enough routine for Minato and his friends. Most homework assignments were easily completed during school hours, leaving a portion of his spare time, to spend with his friends training or relaxing. What little time remained afterward was devoted to private studies and spending time with family.

Minato's lack of progress with jutsu was somewhat disheartening. Suiton mastery was coming along nicely with Kurama's assistance, though his jutsu repertoire was limited to jutsu he was already familiar with. While progress was slow, at least there *was* progress.

Lightning was another story.

From prior life experiences, Minato understood the fundamentals of manipulating and transforming chakra into raiton. There was a finesse that enabled a person to heat and kindle the flow of inner energy, which enabled an individual to produce and control existing fluctuations of lightning.

If water required precise creativity, lightning required contained chaos. Raiton jutsus were difficult to recreate simply because they required far more control than any other element. If Minato had several years to safely dedicate to raiton training, he felt confident in his ability to reverse engineer raiton techniques and
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develop a true mastery of that area of ninjutsu.

Not that he had much of a chance to speed up the process with his family's repeated efforts to sabotage his training.

If Minato attracted Shizune's attention, the kunoichi would cheerily poison him to enhance his resistances to certain substances; while invariably useful, her efforts tended to hamper more than benefit Minato's training.

Tsunade was determined to cram as much medical knowledge into his brain as possible. Minato may have—only a slim chance in hell, truly—convinced Tsunade that he was not specializing as a medical shinobi.

Not that Tsunade demonstrated any signs of caring what Minato wanted. No matter how much he begged, cajoled, and made excuses, the result was the same; at least two days per week, Minato would be stuck following Tsunade around a hospital for a few hours.

There were things he could have gone another lifetime without knowing. Or seeing. Or doing.

Give him dead bodies or an assassination, no problem. Holding an emesis basin while someone vomited or emptying a bedpan made his stomach turn. Assisting in the lancing of a pus-filled ulcer that, once again, made his eyes water.

The silver lining of hospital training, was acquiring some useful skills for fieldwork; containing poison, preventing permanent nerve damage in burn tissue, and the ability to deal with minor injuries.

Minato would never become the medical whiz that Tsunade had become, but what she was pounding into his resistant skull may save a life; for that reason alone, Minato could not complain.

Kakashi, perhaps, was the worst of Minato's problems. Kakashi often deflected Minato's requests to train unless it involved trap making or basic kunai, shuriken, or senbon accuracy. When Minato spoke seriously about his desire to expand his repertoire of knowledge, Kakashi would hug him close, ruffle his hair, and tell him 'little boys shouldn't grow up too fast!' It drove Minato around the bend more often than not.

Far from optimal, it meant that Minato's best tutors were

Ishida-san—the majority of what she taught was stuff he already knew—and Gai. Naturally, Gai was more skilled with taijutsu now than Minato had been in his previous life, which meant earning a few tips from the Green Beast was not a waste of time. The real problem, was that inevitably, Itachi would be training with Gai; Minato trusted Itachi as an individual, but not enough to confide in the older boy. Since Itachi was unfailing perceptive, Minato was forced to keep his meetings with Gai to a minimum.

Which meant that his progress was limited to self-training and Kurama's advice. Minato suspected he would feel much better about his progression if the Obito factor was not such a worry.

Minato ducked, narrowly evading Naruto's sandal to his nose.

Get your head in the game, Minato.

Right.

While he had been lost in thought, automatically reacting to the spar, it was clear from the pinched look on Naruto's face that he was frustrated by his failure to land a decisive hit against Minato.

Minato danced backward, crouched low, and neatly swept Naruto's feet out from underneath him. Naruto growled as Minato tapped the blond's heaving abdomen with his fingers indicating he would have gutted him.

"My win."

"Ugh!" Naruto groaned from where he was sprawled on the grass. "You've gotten faster! How the hell were you moving so fast!"

Had he cranked up his speed without realizing it? If so, he would have to be more careful.

"Kakashi's been pushing me hard lately," Minato lied casually, but with a sheepish grin. "Told him you were hitting harder, so he told me I needed to be faster."

"You told him I was hitting hard?" Naruto jerked upright with a snap, suddenly looking eager.

Minato grinned crookedly and nodded slightly. Seeing Naruto smile was always a reward worth working toward. The blond

had a heart of gold and an insecurity that had never, quite gone away, even after all these years.

"It's true," he assured his friend with a wink, that had Naruto returning his own goofy grin. "You're built for stamina, power, and hard hits. Where I, am skinny and can't take as many hits as you. I *have* to be fast because a few solid blows from you will take me out."

It was true, or it would be. As a jinchuuriki, Minato would always have an edge of stamina and resilience because of Kurama, but physically, his body was slender and would never attain a muscular bulk that some males achieved.

The outcome of Naruto's height was uncertain, but Minato could see that his friend would likely have a build like Jiraiya-sensei, that was both strong and powerful.

And he hadn't been lying: Naruto hit hard.

"You'd better watch out next time, Minato-chan! I'm gonna train really, really hard and be faster *and* stronger."

He would look forward to it.

"Thanks for the warning. Now I'll have to up my game some more!" Minato teased, but quickly diverted the subject. "You finish your homework?"

"Ugh, don't bring that up!" Naruto flopped backward, mopping his sweaty face with his sleeve. "Kaa-san is a slave driver. And Hiashi is even worse than her!"

There were just some subjects that even Minato was unwilling to touch.

A short distance away, Hinata and Sasuke were still going strong. Though, Sasuke appeared to be favouring his left side and Hinata looked slightly singed.

"Hey Minato."

"Hmm?" Minato murmured, not taking his eyes away from his sparring friends.

Hinata's footwork needs to be cleaned up and Sasuke's accuracy with his left hand just isn't as strong as his right. I'll need to work

on that with them and—

"Can you go over this sealing thing with me? Naoka-sensei explained it but I kinda wasn't listening—"

Minato blinked and turned back to Naruto, instantly being beset by pleading hands offered beseechingly and a hopeful look that Minato was practically defenseless against.

"—and I really, really want Kaa-san to think the best of me. Ya know?"

Minato sighed, climbed to his feet, and looked down at Naruto. His friend had a hesitant, uncertainty about him. Without a word, Minato started walking toward the Hatake house, only to call over his shoulder.

"You asked me for help. Are you coming?"

Minato snorted as the sound of pounding sandals followed his statement!

"You're the best! Thank you!"

If only you knew how happy I am to be doing this with you, Naruto.

"You're just lucky I listened to Sensei, Naruto!"

"Heh. You and Sasuke are always paying attention to everything. How you can remember all that crap at the Academy is beyond me! If Kaa-san wasn't such a slave driver, I probably wouldn't do half of all that homework!"

Definitely not a bookworm, like me, but that doesn't make you any less of a hard worker, Naruto.

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"Gah!!!"

Waking with a jerk, Minato groggily jerked upright with an unwelcome crick in his neck making itself known. Rubbing at the tender spot, he rolled over and buried his face in a pillow and closed his eyes again.
~~~~~~

Kid…

I'm tired. What is it?

The lack of answer really should have been his first clue.

"Minato! We're running late!" Tsunade's irate voice was followed up by pounding footsteps.

Footsteps heading straight for his room.

Minato. Your fuinjutsu notes! Get up!

Huh?! What?!

Minato jerked upright, blanched at the sight of the notes—the ones with several weeks worth of scrawled, advanced notations that he would have no explanation for knowing—and stuffed them unceremoniously under his pillow.

Not a moment too soon as Tsunade barged into the room like rampaging rhinoceros with her ponytails askew, sleep gown gaping in a way that would have had Jiraiya on the floor unconscious from blood loss, and a wild look in her flashing, golden eyes.

"Oba-san?" Minato rubbed at his eyes tiredly, even as he shifted his foot subtly to cover a slightly exposed page of scrolls.

"Shizune didn't set the alarm before she spent the night with that little shit!" Tsunade's shook her fist vengefully and Minato instantly pictured a Tenzo-sized crater in the backyard. "We're late!"

Peeking to the clock on the wall, Minato rubbed his temples and tried to soothe the light headache just setting in.

"Get dressed quickly and meet me downstairs. I'll see about breakfast."

Minato's luck held out and Tsunade had stormed out before noting his dismayed horror. Stereotypes could often be misleading, but in the case of Konoha's Senju Hime, some of those stereotypes held more than their fair share of unfortunate truths.

Oba-san's cooking…ugh. As if Minato needed more reasons to visit the hospital.

Tick tock, Minato.

Shit!

Minato scampered around his room; he stuffed his fuinjutsu notes into his schoolbag, threw on his kimono top with the Senju crest on the back, and raked a brush through his hair before tying it back.

The clock in the hall chimed.

Minato bolted downstairs with the Shodai's pendant bouncing around his neck, and skidded to a stop just outside the kitchen.

Thank Kami. No smoke.

Not yet.

Kurama!

"Oba-san?" Minato called, tiptoeing into the kitchen.

Tsunade seemed lost in thought with a slip of paper between her fingers and a pensive look on her face. More than the cosmetic jutsu Tsunade maintained, the momentary timid, insecurity visible on elegant features made her look decades younger.

Ignoring his own headache, Minato wordlessly shouldered his own backpack and padded across the chilly floor to press his face against Tsunade's side in a silent show of support. The touch seemed to revive his silent relative because a moment later the scrape of fingernails over Minato's scalp and he sighed appreciatively and felt his eyelids flutter before shuttering as he almost dozed upright.

He must have been more tired than he realized because he never noticed Tsunade shift, until the peppery glow of an active chakra network tweaked his senses.

"Headache again, Minato?" Tsunade clucked, and Minato smiled weakly at the frown he *knew* was on the older woman's face. "Were you staying up late reading again? You know how I feel about that on school nights."

"I was too close to the end," he replied, grinning widely at Tsunade's exasperated hum, though he noticed his headache was almost gone. "You know I don't like leaving things unfinished."

"Tch, you're stubborn like your father."

“Which one?” He quipped.

“Brat!”

Minato squeaked as he was suddenly jerked into the air wriggling helplessly like a puppy as Tsunade smirked at him ferally.

“Oba-san? Put me down? Please?”

“I catch you staying up past your bedtime again…you’re on bedpan duty at the hospital for a month.”

Minato’s jaw dropped and he gurgled, preparing to protest, but a red fingernail waggled and tapped his nose warningly.

“And that’s *after*, we practice your dodging skills,” Tsunade smiled sweetly and pressed a kiss to his brow as Minato swallowed hard. “Got it, squirt?”

“Got it,” Minato replied as a shiver ran down his spine.

“Wonderful!” Tsunade crumpled the forgotten note in her fist, slung an arm around Minato’s shoulders, and steered them out of the house.

With little time to go, Tsunade purchased breakfast at the sticky bun locale and began quizzing Minato on various medical questions; occasional corrections were made and she methodically explained the role of antigens in the body until Minato’s head throbbed warningly. He was all too thankful to accept the wad of ryo she pressed into his hands for lunch, escaping into the school building before his head exploded from all the advanced medical terminology he was expected to both retain *and* understand.

Not really in the mood to socialize, Minato weaved his way through the halls before slipping into Inuzuka-sensei’s diplomacy classroom a few ticks ahead of the bell.

Minato waved to the girls who affably returned his greeting, nodded at Naruto and Chouji who were each devouring multiple bags of potato chips, and headed toward the back row where only Shikamaru was squeezing in his morning nap. Minato dropped into a seat and pulled out his fuinjutsu notes he had been working on the previous night and immersing himself in where he left off on his two work-in-progress, concepts.

The first was a potential new delivery system for the Hiraishin that would make it more effective and less limited than it had been. Every jutsu had flaws and narrowing those would only be of benefit in the long run.

The latter was his notes on creating a seal to deal with the chakra drain in Kakashi's body. Minato had a lot of ideas, a few more promising than others, but he had spent the last few nights working a conversion seal that looked rather promising.

Minato was just preparing to add a few notations when the first call came in.

"Minato-kun!"

Ugh. I'm never going to make progress.

You will, at a slug's pace.

Ignoring the cackling bijuu, Minato pasted on a smile as Kiba darted up the aisle looking frantic with a dejected Akamaru under one arm and a shredded notebook in one hand.

"Kiba-kun?"

"Dude, you gotta help me!" The Inuzuka shook his canine partner who whined mournfully. "Akamaru ate my homework!"

"And what do you want Minato to do, moron?" Ino shouted from the front row, where a wide-eyed Sakura and amused looking Hinata were observing the scene. "Give you his?"

"Nobody asked you, Ino!" Kiba snapped, shifting from foot to foot and looking at Minato pleadingly. "Dude, can I copy your assignment?"

Why was he not surprised? Oh right, because all his friends *always* asked him. It really was Minato's own fault since he usually enjoyed helping, but today he just wanted to work on his fuinjutsu notes while Inuzuka-sensei gave a lecture that he did not need notes on. Was that so much to ask?

"Inuzuka-san, I believe our sensei would notice if your wording matched Senju-san's style," a pale boy with dark eyes that Minato did not recognize suggested from two rows up. "Your rhetoric is significantly unrefined compared to his."

“Burn!” Naruto crowed in the backdrop, while sniggering could be heard from the majority of students, clan and civilian alike.

“Who the hell do you think you are, you punk?!” Kiba rounded on the thin boy that had spoken up—Minato wondered if he should thank the kid later.

“I’m Sai.” The boy shrugged his shoulders and cocked his head to the side. “You’re the loudmouth, with the smelly mutt, that enjoys detention with that blond idiot, right?”

“The hell did you say?!”

Minato braced himself to intervene before Naruto and Kiba ended up with detention for a year when Inuzuka-sensei arrived and ordered everyone to “Sit down and shut it!”

Kiba and Naruto slunk away together and began whispering harshly and shooting this ‘Sai’ character hateful glowers.

Minato looked up as the chair to his left scraped and Sasuke sat down with a slight hum next to him. They exchanged nods and Sasuke refocused his attention on Sensei.

Minato returned to his notes, keeping an ear open for anything important. An hour passed, with Minato immersed himself on the conversion seal, adding notations for an enhanced filtration matrix, and jotting down ideas for potential tweaking if there was failure with his initial concept.

Creating seals was a process. It required patience and for one to accept the failures that came before the success. Few had the stamina for learning from the tediously, meticulous process of trial and error that came with creating a new seal. Kushina practiced fuinjutsu, but she disliked creating new seals. Inventing something new though…that appealed Minato’s imagination. And maybe in this life, he would make something entirely his own.

“Minato-kun,” Sasuke’s voice dragged him to attention.

“Hmm?”

“Sensei is partnering us randomly for some international relations project.”

“Thanks, Sasuke,” Minato grinned, before leaning over and

prodding Shikamaru awake. “Shikamaru, let’s go.”

The other boy grumbled, but sat up and trudged down behind them to where sensei was writing down group numbers on the board, each with three spaces underneath each. Students were drawing numbers from a box and sensei was adding each name to the board in turn.

“Eh, tough luck, Sasuke,” Shikamaru murmured.

Minato glanced up to see that Sasuke had landed himself in a group with a pair of names he did not recognize—perhaps civilian?

“Meh.”

“You might be surprised,” Minato suggested ruefully. “It could be a really good thing. Make some new friends?”

“No.”

Minato rolled his eyes, rubbed his temples, and snagged a piece of paper from the box.

“Sensei, I have five,” Minato called out, reading the names on the board and finding he had the boy Sai from earlier and Ino.

Ino would be easy to work with…hopefully the other boy would too.

“Good, return to your seat, Senju-san.”

Minato turned to do just that and made it three whole steps, only to freeze when he heard cries of alarm start up around him.

There was no need for explanation as suddenly Minato felt dampness explode around the room and soak through his clothing. Across the room, students began screaming, shouting, and Inuzuka-sensei was barking instructions.

What the hell?

Glancing upward, Minato flipped agilely backward onto a desk and looked up. The sealing array on the ceiling was glowing steadily as water poured downward. Minato recognized the design as ones that would react to either fire or smoke of which there was neither so—

Of course. There were odd spikes of chakra throughout the school, suggesting this was no isolated event. Meaning of course, someone with fuinjutsu training had triggered the seals schoolwide.

And Kiba was rolling on the floor laughing, apparently unbothered by the soaked classroom, while…

Naruto was missing.

"Alright, everyone grab your stuff and get outside!" Inuzuka-sensei shouted. "Now!"

Minato nimbly leapt over his struggling classmates and went to his desk and froze.

The notes he had been painstakingly working on the past few weeks were running with wet ink and completely sodden. Completely ruined.

Minato. You need to calm down. I can feel you panicking.

My work. It's…gone. It's just gone!

They were your ideas. You'll be able to redo your notes.

Not everything.

Minato could not say how long he stared at his ruined work, but a few seconds later Sasuke and Shikamaru were flanking him and he was being lead outside. Vaguely he was aware of the duo trying to speak to him, but Minato was numb to their words and clinging to the misery of what he had lost.

All he could think about, all he could see was his notes that he had carelessly left out dripping wet and destined for a trash can. Certainly, he could recall a lot of the detail, but not everything perfectly. Not those momentary flashes of brilliance that only came during exhaustion in the middle of the wee hours of the night. Minato was no Uchiha with a Sharingan to memorize everything perfectly.

His work was just…gone.

The next thing he new, Minato was sitting outside in a patch of sun with Shikamaru on his left speaking quietly to a worried sounding Chouji. On his right, Sasuke was sitting next to him without speaking.

"I'm sorry, Minato."

Minato closed his eyes, feeling less than confidant that he would be able to conceal his upset. He must have failed miserably because his hand was being gently squeezed.

"It's not your fault, I just…"

Impossible to explain *why* a few sheets of paper was affecting him so.

"I know you worked hard on that stuff," Sasuke voice was filled with remorse and he was speaking slowly, as if he was uncomfortable with the topic at hand. "When you're working on your fuinjutsu, it's the only time that you're completely absorbed in what you're doing. Itachi is like that with his books. I know it means a lot to you. I'm sorry."

Minato returned the squeeze, feeling marginally less upset, and opened his eyes.

Around him, his friends were clustered in a loose group with a few like Hinata and Ino, trying to calm some of the more flustered civilian students. Sakura was shivering, but dutifully trailing her female companions and he saw no sign of Neji and Shino—though that Sai kid seemed equally distraught holding a sodden notebook in his arms next to a boy with greyish hair.

"You alright there, Minato?" Shikamaru stuck him with that Nara gaze that stripped you down and analyzed you like a bug. "You had us worried there for a bit."

About to nod and reassure his friend, the school doors burst open and Kiba ran out, Akamaru under one arm. Naruto was on the Inuzuka's heels looking like the cat that got the cream.

Minato willed his jaw to remain closed as—yet another—outdoor sealing array went off, drenching the already shivering students with a fresh wave of moisture.

Minato typically considered himself a patient person. A tolerant person. A calm, rational person.

Now, he was none of the above.

At the present, Minato felt his jaw tick warningly as Naruto

and Kiba devolved into obnoxious laughter as the entirety of the student populace gaped in slack-jawed horror at the ongoing prank disaster taking place before their shocked eyes.

They're just children…Kushina would have loved this…but I hate this! I really, really have just about had enough!

Except diverting the blame to Kushina did not ease Minato's temper. At best, his jaw was going to ache something fierce later from clenching it so hard.

"What happened?" A poor, clueless civilian student asked from down the line.

Minato dismissed the replies as unimportant, instead trying not to give the dripping, exterior of the Academy too much attention. Not that the interior had been spared damage from the water. Hopefully not too much of an expense for replacing damaged furnishings.

Minato pressed two fingers to the middle of his forehead as his headache ticked up a notch as the chakra signatures around him hummed and his brain radiated the flickers of rapid movement—had to be the shunshin in action—as instructors fought to contain the ridiculous number of triggering seals that Naruto had activated around the area.

What a waste of a day. Of my work! Why are they all so stupid! Sage, my head!

Predictably, a harassed looking Umino-sensei appeared looking very green, harried, and impressively outraged. The chunin snatched up the squirming pranksters, one under each arm, before dismissing the rest of them for the afternoon.

Within seconds, the majority of the students dispersed, leaving his friends idling about.

"Ugh, I can't believe those morons!" Ino's voice called out from nearby. "It's going to take forever to clean up that mess! And all of my homework is useless! I'm going to have to redo it!"

Your homework is useless…my fucking notes are gone!

"Well, I don't mind a day off. Taijutsu practice is brutal!" Sakura's distinctive voice piped in. "Hey! Since it's an early weekend,

do you girls want to have a sleepover? We can shop, eat out, and stay up, and—"

Ugh.

"That sounds kinda fun! If the girls are having a get together, do you guys want to come to my place? It's warm enough we could camp outside and Kaa-san would cook!" Chouji chimed in far too happily.

Almost everyone was relaxing, playful even. Everything Minato himself wasn't feeling. He bit his lip as his friends—and even Neji, of all people—quietly began making plans with Shino.

It wasn't a big deal. None of this was a big deal. His notes were lost, but he could probably remember most of it. It made no rational sense, but Minato felt like pulling his hair out, screaming, and punching something or someone as hard as he could manage.

"Hn, Naruto is going to be grounded once Kaa-san gets a hold of him."

"Tsume-san will probably be unhappy with Kiba too," Sakura shivered.

Get it together. No one is mad. No one is upset. Everyone is fine. They're just enjoying some time being kids. Something...I can't appreciate since I lost my childhood to the war. But they're just…

They were children. Children that did not know what was coming for all of them.

"Minato, anything we can do?" Shikamaru whispered.

Good old, Shikamaru. Shrewdly perceptive as ever.

Minato shook his head bitterly, unable to muster up gratitude as he would on any other day.

"Minato?" Sasuke said to his other side, and he felt his hand being squeezed again.

Pulling away abruptly, he hesitated, not wanting to completely seem ungrateful.

"Thank you both for your help," he said shortly, before disengaging from the pair and taking off.

“Minato-kun, where are you going?” Hinata cried out as he stomped past.

“I’m leaving,” he said with a clipped tone, not bothering to look at anyone as he stalked away.

Not daring to stop, not trusting himself to hold his tongue.

“Oi, Minato-kun!” Chouji’s voice called out.

Minato’s fingers dug into his palms. He kept walking.

“Minato-kun?” Shino, voice betraying nothing.

Minato did not slow, if anything, he pushed himself to walk faster.

“Minato—what’s wrong?” This time, he could not quite place the voice over the roar of sound in his ears.

I can’t fucking do this right now.

“Minato!” Sasuke’s voice this time, sounding worried, concerned, and—

I cannot fucking do this right now!!

“Sasuke, I’m going home,” he managed to blurt out, aware that his voice sounded more than a little forced.

“Do you—”

“I’ll see you later.”

Refusing to be stalled, Minato broke into a run, rounding the gate and quickly scaling the nearest building. Up and over the side in a second, Minato ran until he felt nothing but the breeze easing some of the heat bubbling under his skin, but still, there was such a strain, such a—

I need to get out of here.

He faltered momentarily as he felt the distinct sense of—

Goddamn it!

Today’s ANBU babysitter was keeping pace with him and

Minato felt a flicker of helpless frustration.

Minato had been the Hokage once. The value of a jinchuuriki to a village was not to be underestimated, but at times the stifling behavior was really, *really* aggravating.

Minato abruptly altered course and made a beeline over the rooftop for the Senju Clan home and dropped into the backyard training area. Thankfully Jiraiya's seal array would keep him safe and keep his activities relatively discreet.

His senses would do the rest and they thankfully registered no other chakra signatures aside from himself and the ANBU that would be unable to cross the wards without setting off half-a-dozen alarms.

Didn't matter anyway.

Minato threw himself into a series of taijutsu maneuvers. With merely a beckoning call, pockets of moisture gathered as he directed. The particles of water solidified into a solid, swirling mass that writhed like a living being. It had taken him years to get this far, to pull water from the air around them with such fluid ease.

It was an achievement to master another discipline that Senju Tobirama, *his father*, was renowned throughout the elemental nations for.

Today, it didn't feel like enough. Today, it was a reminder that this is all he had to show. And it wasn't enough.

Fuck. What am I doing?

Minato slumped to his knees, the water dropping with a dull smack to puddle around him and dampen the shorts he was wearing beneath his kimono top.

Been waiting for you to calm down. You feeling better now?

Minato spasmed and sat up abruptly.

Kurama?

The bijuu scoffed and the low rumble sounded almost amused.

Only been stuck with you for the past couple decades. Getting to know your crazy mood swings is just one of the lovely perks.

Minato flopped backward and stared at the sky, noting the sun's position had shifted and it was well into the afternoon. Had he really been working that long?

I don't know what's wrong with me.

Isn't it obvious?

Minato felt his anger dissipate somewhat as curiosity settled in. Kurama had an uncanny amount of insight. Sometimes, his advice was jaded by the last century of experience, but surprisingly often the bijuu offered a perspective that was helpful.

Not to me. I'm just…Okay, look. My friends are all making progress. It's clear that they're working to better themselves. I know how hard they work. I really do, but then there are times…

Days that Naruto and Kiba prank the school and waste everyone's time. You do realize that you have participated in pranks in the past?

I know, but…

But your friends are actually kids, who aren't time-travellers from the future, who saw the world end?

I know that! I do! And…you're right, but I still feel like all of this isn't getting me anywhere.

Let's talk about that.

What's the point? We both already know, what I know.

Humor me.

Fine! Minato snarled, almost recoiling at the viciousness in his own voice and rushed to apologize. *Kurama, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to snap.*

Nice to see I'm finally rubbing off on you. The giant fuzzball purred. ***Alright, I think we can agree you have the Senju taijutsu forms down to an art. Sure, your speed and physical strength need some work, but your body physically needs to grow more before***

you can really worry about that.

Minato grunted lightly, but didn't bother denying it.

It had taken some time to master the taijutsu movements until they felt natural to him. If Tsunade had been surprised by how quickly that Minato picked up on the katas themselves, she had not batted an eye. And honestly, learning to perform a kata perfectly sounded theoretically difficult, but the real challenge was how you used your abilities against a live opponent. And since Minato only sparred with his friends, it was relatively easy to downplay his own abilities since he was never forced to showcase his actual combat ability.

That and a live combat situation was another game entirely.

Stop thinking so hard. It's annoying.

Minato groaned.

We both know that your fuinjutsu is doing more than well. We also know that when you're old enough, we can work on adding that Hiraishin back into your repertoire. And we both know you're trying to improve on it again.

My jutsu needs some work.

Look, I know Kakashi hasn't been all that proactive on teaching you how to manipulate raiton chakra, but you have a lot of time to practice. I know this is going difficult for you to understand, but there is something you need to know.

This might have been significantly easier if Minato was not absolutely positive he was being mocked and humored.

What? He demanded flatly.

You're eight years old. We have probably another eight years before Madara blows up the world. So, give it a rest, already.

We both know that I'm not really, eight!

Mentally, maybe, but you're eight now. Don't forget, your memory is Namikaze's but technically you're separate people. If Orochimaru frees him from the Shinigami's cage,

you're separate. So, remember, you're eight. You need to calm down.

I know. Minato swallowed hard. I do know. It's just hard to see time wasted when—

When you know what's coming. I get it. But you're starting to piss me off by acting like you're an Uchiha with a stick up his ass.

I'm sorry.

You're way too polite for this life. It's a good thing that I know you have the stomach for this job or I'd really be annoyed.

My friends are going to be unbearable next time I see them.

Yep. But I've been waiting for you to have a crisis since the Academy started.

Seriously? And you couldn't warn me?

Some things can only be understood once you experience them. You weren't ready to hear it.

The bijuu had a point, damn him.

Still. And I still feel lousy.

Since you're so worried about this, I have an idea.

Hmm?

Are you going to specialize in medical jutsu?

The heck?

Is that a euphemism for something?

I'll take that as a no. How about tracking?

The hell?!

Of course, not! You know that I need to learn to use sage chakra better than I did before. And, I want to use my fuinjutsu with elemental chakra to—

Yeah, yeah. A simple no would have been perfect. So, I

have an idea about something you can do to get stronger.

Kurama had come up with some ingenious strategies for boosting his abilities before so Minato sat up, and dusted his pants off attentively.

What did you have in mind?

An aspect of him realized that his behavior had instantly shifted to that of a giddy little kid, but suppressed the urge to be disappointed in his own behavior.

Jiraiya did it once and it worked out pretty well for him.

Minato froze, too excited to heed Kurama's rumble of self-satisfaction.

The summoning jutsu…that was it!

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Least you're not in a completely miserable mood anymore.

Hey!

The window rattled and Sasuke's face appeared next to the glass. At a wave from Minato, his friend threw open the window and hopped inside, dropping a thick bag as he crossed the floor to Minato's bed. Wordlessly, Minato scooted over and made room for Sasuke, earning a grunt of thanks as his friend reclined on the pillow next to him companionably.

"I'm going to Chouji's tonight," Sasuke muttered vaguely, though the other boy rubbed his arms slightly.

After multiple sleepovers, Minato had picked up on little things that his best friends might never say, but were nonetheless true. Naruto almost always ended up sleeping with nothing more than a sheet and often complained about being too warm. Sasuke was the opposite; the Uchiha boy never complained but he always preferred cocooning himself in a pile of blankets to sleep easier.

"Naruto being grounded is annoying to listen to so you're taking the opportunity to get out of the house," Minato stated.

With a grunt, he tugged the patchwork quilt up and tossed it over Sasuke who shot him a baleful that Minato ignored as he laid back and stared at the ceiling.

"I was upset earlier and I don't want you to think I'm not grateful, Sasuke. You're an amazing friend. Sorry I took it out on you guys."

"I've seen you sad, but I've never seen you angry. Not like that." Sasuke muttered around the thick blanket. "And don't worry. No one is upset with you. Not me. Not anyone. If anything, we're all worried. And Naruto feels pretty guilty. I'm sorry about him."

"Don't be sorry," Minato stepped in quickly. "Naruto is—" Minato faltered. "Naruto was expressing himself. I left my work out, which is my own fault. Maybe he shouldn't have done that, but Naruto wasn't trying to upset me. I know that, I do. So, I can't really blame him for something he didn't intend to happen. I should have been more careful. I know better than to leave important things out."

"Okay," Sasuke agreed, seeming somewhat less tense. "You coming tonight?"

Minato hesitated, feeling bad at the sudden dejected look that flared for the briefest second over Sasuke's face.

"I'll be there," Minato said softly, somewhat relieved when Sasuke's shoulders relaxed again. "I'll come by later. Save me a plate?"

Sasuke stretched, shrugged off the quilt and picked up his abandoned bag.

"I'll save you a plate. Just, don't be too long."

"Go on, Sasuke-kun. I'll save you from our evil friends, don't worry."

Minato waited until all the chakra signatures in the vicinity had quieted. The ANBU watching the compound was no true sensor, but that hardly meant the woman was incompetent.

I hope this doesn't take too long, Kurama.

It will depend on the summons. Every realm is different, but so are the abilities of each group. Some summons will greet a summoner with combat as a test, while some simply will test your mettle. Honestly, I have no idea what lies in store for you. The only thing I can say is that you won't be paired off with an unsuitable summon clan.

Nothing like a good surprise. For some reason, I'm not that worried. I'm excited.

You have me with you. Fear has no place in our bond.

"Well said, Kurama," Minato grinned, his fingers flying through the signs before breaking the skin on his thumb and slamming his palm to the ground.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry for my long absence. For those of you that stuck it out, thanks for not giving up on me. These past few months have been the most difficult in my life and I can only say that I feel lucky that I fought my way back to continuing this story for you

guys. Love you all very much! You all inspire me!

Chapter 17: Many Confessions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mission accomplished, Hokage-sama!”

Kakashi bowed, offering a jaunty salute to the Sandaime.

The Sandaime took a long drag off his pipe, admirably appearing not to notice the stench wafting off the unfortunate trio cringing behind Kakashi.

“Hatake-san!” The Hokage’s new, delightfully curvy secretary pointed a finger at him. “We’re going to have to assign a D-rank mission to clean up the filth they’ve tracked in!”

“Maa, it’ll be good field experience,” Kakashi dismissed the concern, taking care to flash the cover of his book in the kunoichi’s general direction. “Toughen up their stomachs early on.”

“Ugh!”

The assistant stormed out of the office and slammed the door. Not the most professional sort, though Kakashi supposed that was hardly his problem.

“Is there any particular reason your team smells like decomp?” The Sandaime appeared to inhale the smoke from his pipe a little deeper than strictly necessary. “Or that you you’re your team needed accompany you to give a non-essential mission report?”

“These three,” Kakashi gestured brightly to the dispirited, miserable trio of chunin behind him. “—happen to all be rookie chunin. They need the experience of performing a mission report! As the team leader, it was my duty to ensure they experience all aspects of their new status.”

The Hokage really ought to know better than to assign Kakashi of all people to lead a team of green chunin.

“Why do I always end up with the shifts when Hatake reports?!” A nameless desk operator wailed over a pile of B-rank summaries.

Hmm…only one storm-out and a single crier. Oh dear. Clearly, Kakashi was losing his touch. Next time, he really ought to up the ante.

"Your next set of missions are with Gai," the Hokage stonewalled him.

Ouch. Guess there was a limit to the amount of crap Hokage-sama would put up with. All the more reason to press his luck!

"That seems a bit unfair, Hokage-sama," Kakashi eye-smiled at his clearly unimpressed Kage. "We even completed our mission early!"

"Missions with Gai for a year for offending my olfactory glands," the Sandaime declared, causing Kakashi to wince slightly. Maybe Kakashi had pushed the old man a teensy bit too far this time. "Furthermore—"

"Boss!" Kakashi's ninken, Bisuke, appeared panting in the doorway looking tense. "We got a problem!"

If Bisuke was here, then Minato was… No. No!

"Sandaime-sama, my apologies. Something has come up."

The chunin behind him sputtered in protest, but Kakashi was long gone already, high-tailing it across the rooftops toward home.

"Status," Kakashi bit sharply as Bisuke appeared next to him, the ninken winded but matching his pace readily enough.

"Minato disappeared from Tsunade's residence just over an hour ago."

The words slammed into him like a Raikiri to the chest. Kakashi fell-back on his ANBU training to contain his panic.

"Alright," Kakashi ruthlessly suppressed the bile in his throat. "Tell me what we know! Leave out nothing, even if the details may seem insignificant!"

"Jiraiya's new seals did the trick. Pup hasn't appeared to detect my presence while you were away. The past two days were uneventful. Same old reading, training, and a get together with his friends. This morning, there were some pranks played at the Academy. Something happened that shook the pup up pretty good. Never seen

him like that, Kakashi. The pup cried, Boss."

Emotional conflict. Trauma. The Hatake line was cursed; that was rather evident from a small, but powerful clan becoming all but extinct in less than a century.

"What else?"

"Pup came home, trained, and then settled for a little while. Sasuke stopped in for a brief visit. They made some plans to get together later for a sleepover."

"What else?"

"That's the thing, Boss. Minato went downstairs, and then he was just gone!"

The pair dropped in front of the Tsunade's house and bolted inside and put his nose to work. Kakashi was *the* top tracker in the village. Inuzuka had the same talent ingrained in them, but the Hatake sense of smell was superior. That, and Kakashi was flat out better. No disrespect for his comrades, but facts were facts.

The scent ended in the training area. Bisuke had his nose to the ground walking the perimeter, leaving the central area for Kakashi. It was just as empty as Bisuke's report indicated. No additional tracks, no distress, and no trace of anyone else.

"No intruders, Boss," Bisuke confirmed what Kakashi already knew.

The Sharingan picked up minute leftover chakra impressions, but his nose and intellect solved the mystery; the faintest trace of blood hovered over the ground. Slight enough, that it would never have registered had Kakashi not actively been searching for it.

Just enough blood for a papercut. Just enough chakra residue.

Minato had performed the summoning jutsu.

"Bisuke, find Tsunade and Shizune."

"On it, Boss," Bisuke replied with a miserable droop in the ninken's body. "Call us if you need us Kakashi."

Kakashi dropped to his knees, lowered his hitai-ate, and balled

his fingers into his palms.

Like so many times before…all he could do was wait.

When he comes home. What happens if he doesn't?

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"Fuck! This is exactly like that time that Kumo bitch—"

Bang. Bang.

"Genma-nii? Is everything alright?" Fū called out.

There was an unsuccessful effort to muffle a series of dubious metaphors followed by a disastrous crash and bang.

"Everything's fine!" Genma shouted. "Just great!"

Unconvinced but not particularly concerned, Fū refocused on pinning a pair of clips shaped like orange slices—gifts from Gai celebrating their shared youth—to the top of both mint pigtails. As a kunoichi, Fū never bothered with makeup or pretty clothes, but gifts were special. Gifts were proof that even an unfair beginning can lead to a happier conclusion.

"—dammit!"

What's wrong with your caretaker, today?

Could be any number of things. I don't think Nii-san's date went the way he'd hoped.

Ah. Failure to find a mate.

Yeah, that was not *exactly* how Fū would describe it. Not that anyone else was lining up to explain mating habits to a gigantic, demonic insect. Guess it was up to the bookworm to explain things from an academic perspective.

Or, just wing it.

Well, you see, when humans like each other, we try to engage in a process called dating before uh…mating.
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"Where the hell could I have put it! I always have them!"

What makes it different from those social gatherings you attend with your team?

Typically, the parameters involve bonding activities like a picnic, a film, or having lunch together.

You already do all those things with Genma and your genin team.

Fū shuddered in disgust.

They're just my friends, Choumei! Gross! I'm a kunoichi! The last thing on my mind is dating.

Ah. I approve. You have yet to reach the appropriate phase of physical maturity. That being the case, I wouldn't permit you to seek out a partner at this juncture.

You're a good friend, Choumei. Thank you.

After hearing a clinking smash, Fū opted to intercede before whatever was left of their apartment went up in flames.

"What are you looking for?"

"Can't find my uniform or my supplies!"

Ah. That explained it.

"Genma-nii, you changed your bedding yesterday. Did your uniform get rolled up in there? And I think I put your supply scrolls in your desk drawer."

An abrupt silence followed by a few muttered curses.

The kitchen looked it had been ransacked by a thief rather than a frantic jounin. The countertop was completely hidden beneath a layer of rice and tea bags, while every drawer in the kitchen was open or upended.

Rounding the counter as if she were approaching a skirmish, Fū surveyed the terrain. At least two broken tea mugs, and a graveyard of loose tea. Nothing too traumatic.

Still, Fū decided she would eat out for breakfast. Maybe lunch

too.

“Genma-nii, do you have a mission this morning?”

“Yeah,” the harried reply came.

That explained the kitchen. Genma had torn their place apart after being unable to find his extra supply pouches. Extra supplies that Fū had witnessed some crazy bitch, wearing a trench coat, steal two days ago.

Confronting the crazy bitch had not gone at all the way Fū expected it to go. The kunoichi blew off Fū’s demands to return the supplies, tied her up with Genma’s ninja wire, and patted her on the head. If her easy capture hadn’t been humiliation enough, the kunoichi had cheerfully trapped the entire living room space before leaving.

The thief had been like a character from one of her books, only ten times more impressive in finesse, talent, and appearance! It was incredibly frustrating!

Genma rounded the corner half-dressed in his ANBU uniform, armed with dustpan and broom, while frowning gloomily at the floor.

“What the hell was I thinking yesterday?” Genma asked, rubbing at the grit in his eyes with blown pupils before frowning at the cupboards. “And where is all my shit?”

“Some crazy bitch broke in and took your supplies Nii-san.”

There was a pause followed by an exaggerated sigh.

“Purple hair? Trench coat?”

“Yup. You know her?” And if so— “How come I don’t know her?”

“No one meets Mitarashi Anko on their terms,” Genma mumbled before staring at her pointedly. “Never mind that, what did she do to you?”

Fū mulishly shrugged.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Even if it had taken her hours to escape and disarm the traps,

it was the truth. That encounter had hardened Fū's resolve. No one was going to catch her flat-footed again! Though, perhaps it would be worth seeking out this Anko. The woman had been incredibly competent, quirky personality traits aside.

Genmna shot a look in her direction—as if he didn't *quite* believe her—and proceeded to grumble while sweeping up rice granules and tea bags.

"Genma-nii, I'm going to leave," Fū began walking to the door. "I'll pick up some breakfast while I'm out. Do you want me to refill your supply caches from the store today?"

"Nah kiddo, this should be a quick mission and I have a couple extra kids at HQ. I'll pick up some more supplies from the store plus a few extra necessities that need to be replaced. I'm sorry for the commotion this morning, I was out of line. You didn't deserve to deal with that."

"Nah it's okay. We all have off-days from time to time. Besides, spilled tea isn't exactly the end of the world."

Toeing on her sandals at the door, Fū offered a half-wave from the doorway.

"I'm off to the bookstore. It's new shipment day!"

"Wait a second!" Genma reappeared in front of her with a senbon between his lips, still tying his bandana. "Don't you have training with your team this morning?"

"Nope."

"Are you going to go hang out with Foo and Torune today then?"

"Nah, Foo's sick. Supposed to be the flu, but I think the idiot overdid it building up his poison resistances—again."

Genma scratched his chin, his face expressing lines of concern.

"Do you have *your* poisoned senbon?"

Fū huffed and that had Genma pressing two fingers between his eyes and sighing.

"Of course, you do. Right! Well, hold on a second!"

Genma disappeared and returned a moment later with a cloth sack in one hand and a wad of cash in the other. The ryo was unceremoniously stuffed into her pocket, while he meticulously unfolded a cloth bundle.

"What's that?" Fū asked, naturally curious.

"Ah, picked up a souvenir from one of my last missions."

Fū leaned closer. Souvenir being a term to gloss over corpse looting. Not that Fū disapproved, really it was just practical. Throwing away perfectly serviceable equipment was a waste. Genma grinned and twirled two gleaming metal circles, each edged in serrated teeth with beautiful swirling patterns decorating the steel.

With trembling fingers, Fū reached out for the metal that greeted the chakra in her fingers like a welcome.

"Genma-nii…are these?"

"Aa, these definitely didn't belong to the fellow I liberated them from. These babies are pure chakra metal and whoever crafted them knew what they were doing. I tested them out and they're something special." Fū almost drooled as Genma explained, brushing her fingers over the kanji for protection etched into the steel. "I know you've never worked with chakrams before, but I thought they might suit you. Just be careful handling them or that edge will take your fingers off."

"Genma, they're absolutely beautiful! Thank you!"

"Don't mention it," Genma brushed it off, but she noted the pleased glint to her brother's eyes. "I didn't dose them yet and I won't until you get used to handling them. Learning to aim will be a bitch. The aerodynamics of chakrams are a science all of their own, but they'll be all the deadlier if you decide to go down that route."

"Thank you, Nii-san! I won't let you down!"

Fū was all smiles as Genma produced a leather holster that attached to her belt and pinned the pair of chakrams in place.

"If anyone gives you trouble, what do you do?"

"Drop 'em and bleed 'em!"

“That’s my girl!” Genma patted her shoulder and brushed a kiss to her forehead. “Now go have fun reading and whatever else you *never* get into trouble doing.”

Maybe she was a little old for attention, but Fū didn’t care what other people thought. No one would tell her she was too old for Genma’s affection.

Nose in her book, Fū moseyed down the busy avenue and slipped into the bookstore, just as she finished the last page.

Damn, she had excellent timing!

“Back again, Shiranui-chan!” A portly shopkeeper with oversized jowls waved a jovial hand in her direction. “I *knew* I would see my best customer on shipment day!”

“You have me pegged Haneida-san,” Fū slipped her book away, eager to inspect the new wares. “This shipment brought the latest from releases from Tetsu, right?”

“That’s right! And we have a few smuggled out of Mizu no Kuni too!”

Thankfully, the timely influx of customers rescued Fū from further conversation and she took the opportunity to run her fingers over the covers of the latest releases with true reverence.

In the end, she approached the counter with four books. Flipping through the pages of a mystery novel, Fū waited for the merchant to finalize his sale with a frazzled looking mother with two mewling toddlers hanging from her obi. Without missing a beat, Fū saved a pile of books on child-rearing and cooking from spilling out of her arms, returning them to the thankful woman.

“Will that be all today, Shiranui-san?”

About to respond with an affirmation, Fū trailed off and blinked stupidly at the display on the register advertising the latest edition of those peculiar orange volumes that were so popular.

Icha Icha Combo. Normally, Fū would never have bothered with the books, being technically underage, but the co-author was what *really* caught her attention: Uchiha Shisui.

Uchiha Shisui was the name of Itachi’s cousin. The cousin that

ostensibly was returning from training with Jiraiya of the Sannin.

Oh, this was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Biting back a smile, she cleared her throat and grinned.

“A copy of this too, please.”

“Shiranui-san, this book seems a bit, um,” the clerk fumbled as she raised an eyebrow. “It has content not appropriate for someone your age.”

Knowing the truth was a far better motivator than trying to wheedle a concession, Fū let her expression blank.

“Please don’t concern yourself, Haneida-san. If I’m old enough to kill, I think I’m old enough to watch out for a bit of naughty language.”

Fū observed the man’s jaw work soundlessly for a few seconds before taking pity; scooping up her books, Fū dropped the expected amount of ryo on the counter.

“Thanks a lot, Haneida-san! I’ll stop by next month after shipment day!”

In an alley off the main thoroughfare, Fū sealed her books into a storage scroll and tucked it away in her pouch and frowned.

No training with her team since Foo was ill. Genma was away for his mission. That left her schedule wide open. Treat herself to a massage? Maybe look for Gai-san and train? Binge read her new books all day?

Decisions, decisions!

The dilemma of her day’s activity solved itself as her best friend dropped off the roof next to her.

“Good morning, Fū-san.” Itachi said with a noticeable absence of inflection.

A part of Fū was annoyed: she had utterly *failed* to detect Itachi! Bugger! On the other hand, she was absolutely elated to see Itachi—a significant rarity since he was the disciple of the Sandaime.

Trumping both of those was Fū’s painstaking ability that she

inwardly referred to as UBD: Uchiha Brooding Detector. That warning system was on high-alert after the briefest exchange of words.

So much for a relaxing day.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you in a few days. How are you?”

“The Sandaime mentioned Tenzo’s Team was on medical leave while Yamanaka-san recovers.”

Alrighty. Fū dropped her hands to her hips and cocked her head, the ponytails on either side of her head swaying lightly.

“The Hokage kicked you out of his office?”

A thick silence drifted between them and Fū waited patiently as her friend observed her narrowly. Finally, her stubbornness paid off; Itachi gestured and the pair started walking down the street together.

“Hokage-sama had a private meeting with some of his advisors.”

That wasn’t exactly a denial, was it Itachi?

“Look, you might as well spill your guts now, Itachi,” Fū yawned and stretched her limbs into the air to be tickled by the wind. “We both know the old man said you had a problem dissecting scenarios.”

Itachi had stiffened up as they walked until Fū was almost sure he would bolt.

“Fū-san, your description of the Sandaime’s comments while not completely inaccurate, rather they are embellished by your perception—a skewed one in contrast to what Hokage-sama actually reported.”

“So, I used a bit of creative license with the old man’s words, so what? He still thinks you need to learn to think outside the box.”

“Fū, interpretations leave room for misunderstanding. Furthermore, that was a private conversation, not intended to be eavesdropped on and—”

“Sheesh, down boy!” Fū tapped Itachi’s nose, causing the other boy to nearly jump out of his skin. “You, my friend, are wound

up like a top! Brooding isn't healthy, Itachi! Obviously Hokage-sama knows it too because he gave you the day off!"

"Fū, I assure you that—"

"Okay, just stop!" Fū held up her hand, pleased when Itachi acquiesced and quieted. "Now look, let's go over this together and avoid skewed, misinterpretations. Sound good?"

Itachi nodded curtly.

"Hokage-sama gave you the day off, right?"

"The Sandaime relieved me of duty for the day."

"Itachi, Itachi, Itachi," Fū grinned, pleased when her reluctant friend studied her warily. "A simple 'yes' would have worked fine, you goof!"

"I was attempting to relay—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Accuracy and all that. Heh, never mind!" Fū twirled in place. "So, you could be training, right?"

Itachi visibly hesitated and Fū felt like bursting into dance.

"That is correct."

"Okay. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

Fū could work with that.

"Have you been by the Academy yet?"

There was a longer pause, during which Itachi stared her down. Fū just folded her hands and audibly tapped her foot, pleased when the Uchiha broke eye-contact first and looked at the ground.

"I know you're a stalker when it comes to your brothers. But just to clarify, you don't technically have anywhere you're required to be, right?"

"Not until tomorrow."

Fū bit her lip, jabbed Itachi with an elbow to the side, and

grinned sheepishly when he gave her a sharp glare in reply.

"I'm glad you came to see me, Itachi. You're a good friend."

Fū halted just outside the dango stand that she knew was Itachi's favorite, even if he had never admitted as much.

"Want to get some takeout and go find somewhere to sit and talk?"

It took Itachi barely half a second to offer a curt nod as they lifted the flap and moved forward to order. Fū had just finished when she turned to Itachi and paused; just beyond where they were standing, a trio of civilian females looked almost dazed as they turned and wandered away.

"Really?" Fū complained in a harsh whisper. "They were civilians! They're harmless!"

"As harmless as exploding tags."

Fū paused. She turned and stared at the mulish annoyance on Itachi's face before bursting into laughter.

"Who knew! Uchiha Itachi is afraid of fangirls!"

Itachi quirked a brow and his lips twitched slightly.

"You totally are!"

"Your assertion is flawed."

"Your denials are futile! You Sharinganed fangirls!"

"Fū, that isn't a word."

Hardly mattered. Itachi was smiling softly and Fū felt her joy surge another notch.

A handful of minutes later, Fū sat elbow to elbow with Itachi, on a roof, across from the Academy.

"Seems like this spot is as good as any other to watch kiddies learn the handle from the pointy end!"

Itachi inhaled his dango quickly, yet somehow retained perfect manners while doing so. Maybe all Uchiha were just destined

to make mundane tasks like consuming nourishment look regal.

"So, which brother of yours are we stalking today? Sasuke? Naruto? Both?"

Itachi shook his head but otherwise remained focused on the exterior of the Academy.

Great, back to brooding again.

"You feel like telling me what's wrong?"

If she hadn't been observing Itachi, Fū would have missed it, but for an instant Itachi's face looked his age of a mere thirteen years, rather than burdened by decades of added maturity. Itachi's lips were pursed, his eyebrows knitted together, and his cheeks colored slightly.

The symptoms vanished as her friend suppressed his emotions, making her heart ache for Itachi. Even if it was only once in a while, Fū vowed she would be there to help Itachi remember how to smile.

"Alright, I think we had our fun pretending earlier." Fū fidgeted with one of the loose roof tiles. "So, let's skip the Uchiha repressed stuff, okay? I don't care about you being the Hokage's apprentice or that you're a genius, that will beat me every single time in a spar, even if I am a jinchuuriki. You're my friend, Itachi. I want to help you so…just say whatever you're trying so hard not to say before you explode. I'll listen and help you."

They sat for a few minutes of quiet, stillness and sunshine. A tiny squirrel darted past with a mouthful of seeds; a baker down the street got into a disagreement with a customer, that drew the attention of two members of the police force, while a clever street child nicked a loaf of bread while everyone was occupied. Fū had just coaxed a moth with a beautiful pattern of light and dark greys onto her finger, when Itachi finally came to life beside her.

"There's been something troubling me."

No shit.

"For how long?"

Fū brought the moth to her nose and marvelled at the delicate patterns covering the wings. Had Choumei's wings looked like that? In her excitement, maybe she had missed the small details. Next time,

she would look.

“Years,” Itachi remarked flatly, an ounce of that frustration leaking past his controlled veneer.

Years…hmm. Fū coaxed the moth into flight and felt almost melancholic as the tiny insect fluttered down and away.

“It’s not me, is it?”

“No.” Itachi actually turned and reached out, pausing in motion, before dropping his hand onto her shoulder and squeezing gently. “No.”

A knot released from her stomach and Fū summoned up a hesitant smile that seemed to soften the lines around Itachi’s face. “Guess it can’t be too bad then. Lay it on me, Itachi.”

Itachi pulled his hand back into his lap and stared toward the crowd of Academy students. Despite the breeze, Fū felt her nerves twist the longer Itachi went without responding. Finally, after what could have been anywhere from thirty seconds, to four minutes, Fū quipped.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Itachi grimaced.

“I’m apologize,” Itachi remarked. “I’m finding it difficult to know where to begin.”

At some juncture, Fū would need to pick her jaw up off the floor, but until then, she gaped at her friend who was fiddling with his empty dango sticks.

“I hear the beginning is a good place,” Fū tugged on a strap of her sandal. “Or wherever feels right. You’re a genius and I’m of above average intelligence. I’m sure we can figure it out.”

Another crack in the infamous Uchiha façade, this time with a tick at the corner of the eyes.

“Ever since he arrived in Konoha, I’ve thought Senju Minato was a peculiar child.”

Oh, damn. Yeah, Fū had a notion that her day had just become a lot more complicated.

For almost an hour, Fū listened as Itachi spoke, interest more than piqued by how closely Choumei was following their conversation.

Senju Minato was complicated. Senju Minato with maturity beyond that of his peers. A boy that picked up anything taught to him with frightening ease and efficiency. A child that rarely exhibited any sort of surprise. A child that had witnessed death and had been almost unaffected by the experience.

Senju Minato didn't make sense.

"Okay, so have you talked to anyone else about your concerns?"

Someone wiser?

Itachi sneered. Legitimately, lip curling sneered. It was an expression Fū could live without witnessing again. Sneering Uchiha were commonplace, but not Itachi.

"Yes."

Oh, boy.

"Hokage-sama?"

"I approached Sensei recently with my concerns regarding Minato-kun's proficiency with fuinjutsu. I explained that I had observed him instructing Hyuuga Hinata in the foundations of sealing."

Fū was not intentionally being obtuse, but teaching another kid didn't seem like a major issue to her.

"Is it his ability to teach another student what you took issue with?"

"It was not the explanation that bothered me. I was considered a prodigy for my ability to rapidly process information and grasp concepts at an accelerated pace. What concerns me is that Minato-kun's explanations exceed *my* understanding of the discipline at the most basic level."

Alright, that was a little bit scary since the Professor was at least proficient with sealing. Every Hokage was!

"I also pointed out that the rate of progression under Ishida-san was, quite frankly, unbelievable. Fuinjutsu is not something that can just be explained. It takes time and practice that Minato-kun simply does not seem to require. I suspect he must have already had some knowledge already."

"What did the Sandaime say?"

"Hokage-sama regaled me with a series of tales regarding Senju Tobirama's prowess. He furthermore suggested that everyone learns at a different rate and that he was pleased to hear that Minato shared the Nidaime's talents."

Right, so basically the old codger had been so pleased that he dismissed Itachi's arguments as validations to an impressive lineage. Yeah, that would definitely have pushed her buttons too. Still, it seemed a bit hard to swallow that their military leader was willfully blinding himself to potential possibilities.

Then again, Fū got the unofficial story on Orochimaru's defection from Genma. If the Sandaime could be dismissive of *him*, why not Itachi's concerns?

"What about Tsunade-sama or Hatake Kakashi?"

If possible, Itachi's expression darkened.

"Tsunade-sama was exceptionally pleased to hear that Minato's progress surpassed expectations. Indeed, when I expressed my concern for the impossibility of his talents, she suggested that Senju genius was hardly something an Uchiha should be jealous of."

"Wait, she attributed your concerns to clan politics?" Fū said in disbelief.

Itachi's curt nod answered that question.

"Hatake Kakashi was worse. I discussed Minato's progress with suiton jutsu and how his abilities were improbable for an individual that had received very little supervised training. While Minato may not yet have the Nidaime's level of mastery, I find it difficult to believe the boy has developed such proficiency on his own."

True.

Choumei?

Let him finish, hatchling. I want to hear what your Itachi has to say.

"And Kakashi's reaction?" Fū asked.

"Hatake Kakashi reminded me that he attained the rank of chunin far younger than I after being orphaned and left to train on his own. Kakashi also insinuated that Minato's ability is a reflection of his parentage, while underhandedly suggesting that my own status as a prodigy has blinded my judgment."

"From the look on your face, that isn't all."

"True. Hatake may have suggested that paranoia leads to accidents."

Fū gasped. Exactly what Itachi implied was unbelievable.

"He threatened you?" Fū heard the disbelief in her voice. "Well…you'd probably do the same thing if someone so much as looked at Sasuke wrong. So, I'm thinking you can't really hold that against the guy."

"Inability to separate emotions from rational decision making is dangerous."

Pot, kettle. Maybe prodigy madness *was* a thing.

"Do you think Senju Minato is dangerous?" Fū asked. "Or is it the unexplained aspects of his abilities that bother you?"

"Minato has expressed deep emotional ties that are not faked. That truth being accepted, the possible reasons for a deception of this magnitude are alarming."

Alright, fair enough.

But what could Fū say? More importantly, what did she *want* to say? It was obvious to her that Itachi was on track to solving some mystery. But what *was* the mystery?

Fū, if it wasn't for the Kyuubi, we would still be in Taki.

Choumei's voice trailed off with a disheartened chatter.

Fū forced herself to scratch her cheek and remain as still as possible.

Choumei? What do you want me to do?

The pervading silence was enough of an answer. Fū was on her own, but Choumei was obviously worried. And if Choumei was worried enough to reach out to her, Fū was involved whether she wanted to be or not.

That meant that…she needed to derail Itachi's suspicions somehow. Making the impossible task even more improbable, Fū cared about Itachi. A lie would destroy their friendship, something Fū would do almost anything to prevent. But if she didn't lie, what then?

Lying was a bust: if Fū wanted to protect Minato, she would have to offer a plausible explanation. Not just an explanation, a legitimate possibility that the genius hadn't accounted for.

Honestly, tactics were not her thing. Fū liked reading stories, but that was because life had been lousy until Genma found her and carried her into a better life. A bookworm did not an intellectual make. At least not with the kind of books Fū enjoyed reading.

Ugh, this is impossible! What the hell am I going to do?

With no other possibility worth considering, Fū did the only thing she could think to do under the circumstances: stall.

"How come we never heard anything more about where Minato was living before he showed up here?" Fū asked.

C'mon! Think! What am I going to do?!

"Nothing solid. Unfortunately, the civil war in Kiri makes the area difficult to infiltrate. We suspect surviving Uzumaki encampments would have fled to those areas. At this juncture, locating former inhabitants is almost impossible since the Mizukage has razed a number of villages to the ground."

"Minato didn't know any names?"

"No. This is one of the many holes in Minato's story. When he arrived in Konoha, not only was he articulate, lacking in the shy mannerisms customary to those suffering from social isolation, he was also literate. Not only could he read and write, but Minato's knowledge base was far from limited. I find it highly unlikely that a child demonstrating such aptitude would be unable to provide more details of his jailors."

Jailors…but was that…?

“Do you disagree with the description? I suppose you might.”

“Yes. No! Wait, hold on,” Fū’s mouth fell open.

Was it that simple a thing?

“Senju Minato is a jinchuuriki.”

“Yes. A fact that you and I are aware of, but few others are.”

Fū sucked in a breath. This was it. This was it! This was how she was going to lay a trail of breadcrumbs!

“Itachi, I don’t really get this part, but he’s the Kyuubi jinchuuriki.”

“Yes.”

“But he wasn’t the first…” Fū rasped, sitting upright in shock at her own insight. “Like, Minato wasn’t the original Kyuubi jinchuuriki, right? Were there others before him?”

This was the part Fū was a little unclear on. Even though prior jinchuuriki would be long dead at this point, their existence was always considered classified intel—meaning far above her pay grade.

“Yes.”

Alright then. For Itachi to actually confirm something that was technically against the rules was…something.

It provided clarity for Fū’s explanation and potentially the key to Itachi’s mystery.

“It…it makes sense now.”

And maybe it did. Holy shit. *What if I solved this fucking thing?*

“Fū, what is it?”

Not imagining it, Fū was aware that Itachi’s dojutsu had activated. Genma had told her once that an Uchiha focused on something was like a dog with a bone. Seemed it was true even with their best and brightest.

“Minato told me once that he spent his life before coming to Konoha in a dark place,” Fū spoke as her thoughts connected the dots. “At the time, I didn’t pry, but I think he might have mentioned something about spending time alone. Like sensory isolation.”

“Yes. The T&I experts claimed he was not lying,” Itachi seemed wholly dissatisfied with that outcome, but unable to refute their expertise either.

“Because of everything that didn’t fit with that theory, right?” Fū listed his arguments. “The reading, speaking, seals, and that stuff?”

“Yes.”

“I think you’re right, Itachi,” Fū acknowledged, pressing her hand to her abdomen where her own seal resided. “There are pieces of Minato’s explanation that don’t add up, however, didn’t you tell me once that sometimes our perception of things may be nothing but an illusion?”

It was a subtle straightening in Itachi’s spine, an aura of authority that compelled Fū to explain herself—and quickly.

“Itachi, I don’t think Minato lied, but I also don’t think he’s been completely honest with everyone either.”

“What do you know?”

“I just have a perspective you don’t have Itachi. I know that you’re right, but I also know that Minato wasn’t lying. No *person* taught him anything.”

“Fū,” Itachi breathed, shifting into slight alarm. “If you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting—”

“You’re right…just give me a second. I’m trying to figure out how to explain this without freaking you out,” Fū winced. “Even if I seem to have already done that.”

This moment was dangerous and potentially damning. Fū trusted Itachi, but she knew duty came before loyalty in Konoha—especially for a Hokage. What began as a discussion could hold lasting implications for the jinchuuriki in Konoha.

No pressure.

At the end of the day, could she live with herself if she didn't speak up?

Heck no!

"Alright, I'm a jinchuuriki. When shinobi think of me, they see a weapon, they see a sacrifice, they see a bijuu," Fū refused to let her head hang. "To regular people, even our comrades, jinchuuriki are nothing but trash. Seeing how Naruto is treated by the villagers, reminds me of Taki. People see only my bijuu, they don't see me. They don't see Fū. But it also makes me angry because I can't help who I am. I can't help that I'm a jinchuuriki. And it's not Choumei's fault either. We didn't ask to be what we are."

There was a question in her friend's eyes. Fū could see the confusion reflected in that otherwise collected visage, but she just shook her head and tried to convey her need for him to listen. It must have worked because Itachi settled, though still looked earnest and worried.

"I've been truthful about going slow with my relationship with Choumei. We're just learning to work together as partners," Fū swallowed, knowing the most difficult part of her task had arrived. "We've been on speaking terms since I came to Konoha and I feel confident in saying that Choumei is my friend, but Minato's relationship is different somehow with the Kyuubi."

"In what way is it different?"

"I'm sorry Itachi, I'm having a difficult time explaining this. Right then! Umm…okay. I'm not a natural sensor. You're not either, but you are able to feel chakra, right?"

"I have honed my ability to detect chakra," Itachi replied, angling his thumb toward his eyes. "With and without my dojutsu."

"Okay…well, uh here. Look at my chakra with your Sharingan."

"Okay, so my chakra control used to be shit. Like the worst ever. Naruto probably struggles to learn techniques and is forced to prioritize chakra control, right?"

Itachi nodded an affirmative.

“Right, well, I can’t say I’ve ever stalked Minato,” Fū grinned as Itachi’s brows narrowed slightly. “But I’ve going to assume that Minato has better chakra control than Naruto, by a fair margin too.”

“If that were the case,” Itachi remarked blandly. “Why is it relevant?”

“I can’t exactly claim to be an expert in all things bijuu, even though I have Choumei. But! I am saying that Senju Minato’s chakra control is better than mine because his relationship with his bijuu is better than mine. Or…” Fū bristled. “—Basically, he’s used to constantly working with his bijuu. Even though Choumei and I are on agreeable terms, there is still a struggle to really get a grip on that chakra. Almost like a game of tug-of-war.”

“While the implications of what you say could very well be accurate, this doesn’t really—”

“Yes, it does!” Fū bristled. “I know you’re the Uchiha genius and you’re definitely smarter than I am, but shut *up* and listen to me. I’m the jinchuuriki here, you’re not, so quit interrupting me and let me try to figure this out!”

Fū was so frustrated that she couldn’t even muster up the energy to feel badly for screaming at Itachi. Why was it so hard to explain a concept? Itachi was a genius, that rather suggested he was quick to comprehend. If Fū could just stop rambling and get to the point, her misery would be cut short for the evening.

“Alright, I only really figured this out myself recently but…I’m guessing Minato must have figured it out…years ago.”

It was disorienting to have the full focus of an Uchiha on you.

Fū.

The words resonated with such force that she gasped aloud. A hand dropped to her shoulder, but Fū was too busy focusing on breathing through the sudden flare of chakra.

Tell the Uchiha to come before me.

“What?!” She choked.

“Fū, what’s wrong?” The hand on her shoulder shook urgently.

Trust me. Tell the Uchiha to come speak with me.

How?

Trust me.

Well, when he put it that way.

"Choumei wants to speak to you," the words tumbled out of her mouth. "He said you would understand how."

"The Nanabi," Itachi murmured.

Itachi placed both hands on her shoulders and Fū felt like she had been dumped in a tub of molasses. In between quickened breaths, Fū heard the loud thumping of her heartbeat and the bare skin of her shoulders tingling where Itachi's palms rested.

Itachi's beautiful ebony eyes had melted into the spinning red that was dissolving everything around them.

"Breathe, Fū."

~~

Fū roused in the field of her mindscape.

Fū.

Beneath a starless sky, in the midst that field, eight massive stone pillars with a shimmering dome of glowing green energy. Beyond the green shimmer, a massive insect with intelligent eyes looking down at her curiously.

As was their custom, Fū placed her hand on the surface of the glowing barrier. A moment passed, but an amber wing brushed the spot where her hand rested.

It was progress. Choumei responded quicker each time she visited him.

The space within her soul shuddered and rippled as a foreign entity breached the barriers of her mind and solidified next to her. Fū experienced a subtle sensation of discomfort as a patch of chakra shimmered next to where she stood. From the invasive entry, Itachi manifested, appearing impossibly intrigued by the colossal bijuu.

It's been some time since I've seen those eyes. I was hesitant to speak to you.

'Why speak to me at all?' There was no accusation in Itachi's words, a mere fragment of curiosity.

Within the confines of this seal, I am a prisoner. There is no escaping that destiny, but I am privy to all the hatchling's experiences. Every interaction, every person, every jutsu—I see all that she sees. The tedium of my existence is almost bearable, now that I have a container willing to engage with me.

Itachi appeared solemn and thoughtful, but deliberately moved closer to the cage.

'Why did you ask to speak to me?'

Fū trusts you.

Eyes whipping up, Fū gasped softly at the large insect that chirruped loudly.

If Fū believes in you, I will put my faith in you too.

It's a struggle to contain her emotions, but she manages, if barely.

Something has changed in Itachi's demeanour, though Fū is at a loss to say precisely what is different.

'Fū suggests there is an explanation for Senju Minato's oddities.'

You have been present during the periods of time where Fū has been learning to use my wings. While humans have no experience with wings, learning to fly requires little direct instruction from me. Some of my techniques and skills would require direct instruction. A considerable span of time would be required—should I choose to impart these things.

Next to the cage, Fū gasps as a book she has never seen appears just outside the bars. Sensing Itachi looking over her shoulder, she reaches down to pick up the browned cover and flips to the first page. For an instant, it appears blank, only for kanji to appear as if it were being written before their eyes.

'Choumei, what is this?'

This is a replica of my first jinchuuriki's journal. He never

spoke to me, but my memory is perfect and I can recreate its contents word for word should I choose.

'Choumei,' Fū gasps, fingers trailing over an ink smudge mark, before glancing back up to her bijuu with eyes. 'This is incredible. I had no idea you could reproduce things.'

And this.

The book vanishes from her hands, the meadow fades to only the cage, but Fū trembles and recoils with a gasp. Itachi's spectral arms wrap around her shoulders and ease her shaking, but she is staring at Choumei's conjuration with fascinated horror.

Barely a few feet away from where she is standing, Fū sees a girl of maybe three years with tangled, unkempt hair, following a pair of guards wearing the hitai-ate of Taki. Fū shivered at the utterly blank look on the memory version of herself.

Mercifully, the vision dissipated as if it had never been leaving Itachi, Choumei, and Fū alone.

'That was Fū's memory?' Itachi asks.

No. They may be from her perspective, but these are all my memories. Anything I've experienced with my jinchuuriki, I recall in perfect detail. Any anything I have witnessed, I can pass on to Fū in this manner.

Itachi staggered and Fū felt almost floored with realization.

'And because of the time difference here, I see," Fū said faintly.

'Time difference?' Itachi murmured.

'Yeah, I wasn't sure how to explain that earlier. Sorry if I confused you, Itachi.'

If you were to spend several hours in this plane with me visiting and sharing knowledge, you would leave here with only a few minutes passing in the real world.

'This is why you chose to answer my question in a different way. Instead of just telling me, you showed me how my preconceived notions were faulty.

Correct.

'If the information you provided is accurate, then one minute in the real world roughly translates to one hour in this place…that would mean…"

A hatchling can only endure a certain amount of mental fatigue, but I can assure you that it's very possible that the Senju scion has spent at least a few years worth of time with the Kyuubi.

The ramifications of that information were staggering. Fū could see that Itachi understood that, perhaps was even thunderstruck by that notion.

'Does this explain Itachi's concern with Minato's fuinjutsu?'

Yes, Fū. The Shodai Hokage's mate was a master in fuinjutsu. After she sealed the Kyuubi into herself, the Shodai Hokage proceeded to hunt the remaining bijuu down and lock us away. Personal feelings aside, all of that woman's knowledge and subsequent experiences would have been privy to the Kyuubi. And in turn—

'You are claiming the Kyuubi taught Senju Minato.'

Among other things. Does any other possible explanation fit, Uchiha Itachi?

'You have presented a compelling argument that sets many of my concerns at ease, but I do worry about what level of influence the Kyuubi has with Senju Minato. I may accept that you wish to set aside your resentments and partner with Fū, but if Minato does have closer ties to the Kyuubi, the potential threat that relationship poses is another matter.'

Inexplicably, Fū felt as if Choumei's gamble had failed. It appeared that Itachi's suspicions had abated, but for what? There was a hardened resolve where they had been none before.

Itachi, you have a brother. Fū mentions him from time to time. A friend of the Senju boy.

'Yes.' Itachi replied, though her friend looked anything but comfortable.

Then you know that you would do anything to protect him. I have eight siblings. Each of them unique in powers and personality. The eldest and most powerful of us, saved his love for one individual alone. With his passing, the Kyuubi distanced himself from us and embraced the identity as an incarnation chaos and destruction.

For many years, we were separated, but occasionally I could feel my brother's hatred rend the earth, even from a cage. I could do nothing for my brother, nor would I have desired to assist him. For many generations, I too hated others for stealing my freedom and sealing me away.

Loneliness is a peculiar emotion. Fū's feelings mirrored my own and I somehow began to care again. Day by day, I began to see Fū as more than a container. I still hated, but I wanted to feel something different, something that I had forgotten how to experience.

Fū became my hatchling, a being that I cherish. For her, I have changed.

If Minato were being influenced, it would have been obvious and it would have been sudden. My brother is not a patient hunter.

As someone who had forgotten what love felt like, I beg you not to take it from my brother. Naruto's half of my brother's soul reviles his container and is consumed by his hatred, not so with Minato.

Senju Minato feels like peace.

I recognize that I have no influence in whatever decision you intend to make, but I implore you, human, reconsider. My brother is capable of all the evil you believe, but he also has learned to love again.

Just as I have learned to love Fū.

'Choumei,' Fū felt her resolve crumble. Without care, she pressed her hand to that damnable barrier. 'Choumei, I love you too. I'm proud to be part of you.'

'Thank you for speaking to me, Choumei-sama,' Itachi's words felt like they were far away. 'Your wisdom has been a great benefit. Thank you for sharing your knowledge, and your secrets.'

Consider your decisions carefully, Uchiha Itachi. The answer that correct is not necessarily right. Don't betray our trust.

A rather introspective look followed by a short, respectful bow.

'You said earlier that you had seen eyes like mine. Who?'

A story for another time, Uchiha Itachi.

The real world felt dull by comparison. But when Itachi reappeared in front of her, red bleeding to ebony again, Fū sucked in a breath, her eyes beginning to burn with unshed tears.

Itachi released her shoulders abruptly, turning away to stare blankly over the rooftops.

"I understand why Minato-kun wouldn't say anything."

"Do you?" Fū swiped at her eyes, rubbing at the moisture with the back of her sleeve.

"To admit to speaking to a bijuu is—"

"Cause for concern, interrogation, and possibly an extended stay in a sealed room."

"Fū."

"But of course, *you* get it," Fū hiccupped in a tone teetering between sarcasm and hysteria, tears beginning to run down her cheeks. "You understand completely what it's like for no one to give a shit about you! To know that you would starve if not for the mass of chakra pumping you full of artificial stamina…fixing broken bones when the people that are protecting you kick you until your ribs break! Knowing that if anyone finds out that I'm friendly with my *tenant*," Fū spat the word through tears. "—I'd be under more surveillance than I already am. And don't even deny it, I'm a jinchuuriki which means I'm a village asset!"

Before she could react, Fū found herself wrapped in a startling powerful embrace. Itachi was thin, lithe, and rather bony beneath his clothes. For those reasons, Fū attempted to struggle free, but Itachi's arms were like iron bands and eventually Fū sagged, collapsed against a surprisingly sturdy shoulder, and wept.

"I'm sorry."

Somehow hearing Itachi—her emotional wreck of a best friend—apologizing, pushed her over the edge.

"I didn't ask for this, you know," Fū blubbered, fingers seeking purchase in her best friend's shirt and holding on for dear life. "None of us do. If it were up to me, I'd work at that bookstore, or maybe I'd

beg the Yamanaka Clan to teach me to arrange flowers…I think I would have liked that a lot."

The hands gripping her tightened before one hand tentatively relaxed and began rubbing circles into her back. The gesture soothed her and her tears ebbed and Fū

"All the people around me have choices. The girl at my apartment complex is moving to Tea Country to marry a samurai! A boy in my class dropped out of the Academy and became a carpenter. The Hokage's son accepted a position to guard the Daimyo! Well, no one asked me! I never asked for this! I never asked to be living weapon! But I am!"

"Fū…"

"I'm a weapon and that's my lot in life," Fū wept bitterly. "Nothing I can do about that. If there is another war, I l know I'll be sent to battlefield. It's expected! Minato knows it. We don't talk often, but I know he knows. I can see it in his eyes. He knows that someday we'll be sent off to fight some battle. And hopefully it's a battle of our choosing! Probably not though. We're just weapons."

"You are *not* a weapon, Fū," Itachi spat, looking angrier than she had ever seen him.

"Aren't I? You're going to be the next Hokage probably. Are you honestly able to tell me that Minato, Naruto, and I aren't pieces on a shogi board? Don't devalue our friendship by lying to me."

"I can't tell you that you're not important to Konoha, but I can tell you that you're important to me. You're my best friend, Fū. And for what little choice you were given, I think you and Choumei are well-matched."

"Yeah we are…I really do love him. When I had nobody else, he was there." Fū sniffed. "Is this okay?"

"You and Shisui are my closest friends," Itachi's voice was light and almost delicate. "A hug seems perfectly acceptable when your friend is sad."

"Hmm…"

They sat like that, staring up at the sky on the rooftop together, just being for a while.

“I am glad you’re here, Fū,” Itachi whispered, words barely audible. “I hope someday, Choumei and I can become friends too.”

“I think he’d be okay with that,” Fū rubbed at her eyes tiredly. “You’re so bony.”

“Sorry.”

“S’alright,” Fū grinned. “I forgot to tell you about something.”

“Oh?”

“I bought your cousin’s new book.”

“…what?”

“He didn’t tell you in his letters? It’s called Icha Icha Combo. Weird title, but I figured I should support your cousin. Haneida-san didn’t want to sell it to me, but I managed to convince him.”

“I’m going to kill Shisui,” Itachi scowled.

Aha, so that’s where Sasuke gets his glares of death.

“Is he a bad writer?”

“Jiraiya-sama is famous for his adult erotica collection. I assure you, whatever level of marginable writing talent Shisui has is irrelevant.”

Oh. Oh!

“Well,” Fū struggled to change the topic, finding herself cringing as a cloud suddenly looked far too cylindrical for comfort. “You, uh, want to go flying?”

Itachi’s arms tightened around her suddenly before dropping away.

“Aa, let’s go.”

Itachi, thank you.

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Familiar with the story of Jiraiya’s arrival at Mount Myōboku,
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Minato had imagined himself prepared for the unexpected: so much for that.

The second his home disappeared, Minato was submerged completely in water. No plunge from above, just water. Expertly supressing his panic, Minato opened his eyes and blinked away the expected tingle from the saltwater.

Right beneath Minato's nose, was a thriving undersea garden. Schools of colorful fish darted through coral caverns, around the edges of anemones and rocks coated by seaweed and clam shells.

Logically, the positioning of the reef provided bearings that indicated the direction of the surface. With a final appreciative glance to a trio of seahorses swimming circles around a prickly urchin, Minato kicked off with a bit of chakra enhanced speed.

Halfway to the surface, Minato detected three chakra signatures approaching rapidly. Two felt like potential, while a third felt massive and overwhelming in presence the way Boss Gama always felt.

The intent is not hostile…yet. Keep your guard up, Minato. We're about to find what summoning realm you've dragged us to. With my guess, your suiton affinity is partially responsible for this.

You say that like it's a bad thing!

You tend to find trouble easier than most.

Yeah, I suppose…wait. What are you implying?

Shut up and pay attention!

In a flash, two blurs the size of ponies swam into range. Inquisitive inky eyes blinked and whiskers brushed against his cheeks, large noses snuffling his face.

Otters. I have never heard of anyone with a contract with them.

Boldly, Minato extended both palms to stroke the fur under each muzzle. The fur was soft to the touch and the otters seemed to enjoy the attention; both heads pressed into Minato's hands, their mouths opening to expose impressively sharp teeth.

Don't be fooled by how cute and cuddly they look. Otters are

ferocious in and out of water when they need to be. Like your old battle toads, they're formidable. The one occasion I witnessed them on the battlefield, they were impressive.

High praise indeed.

The friendly duo pulled back, each otter holding the end of a net utterly bursting with fish. Otters with fishing nets seemed a bit bizarre, but he supposed it made about as much sense as a smoking, sword wielding toad.

Both otters waved a webbed paw and emitted a warbling chirp in greeting. The wave of sound was rich and echoing under the water, but felt welcoming to him, just the same.

Minato returned the potential greeting with his own underwater wave, a bubble of air escaping his lips.

From the side, the massive chakra source rustled and propelled itself into view. A Gamabunta-sized otter, sporting jagged electric blue markings, on each furred cheek. One paw held a naginata while another paw snaked outward, latched onto Minato, and hauled him closer. Sensing no ill intent, he used his chakra to cling to the impossibly soft, slick fur.

Just as soon as he latched on with chakra, the massive mammal torqued its body a solid ninety degrees, and started swimming rapidly. Minato ignored the dragging force of the current, instead focusing on the impressive demonstration of agility bolstered by chakra. In his previous life, he likely would never have thought anything of the currents of chakra shifting under the command of the massive otter, but as a sensor, it was both exhilarating and disorienting.

Instead of the smooth current of chakra manipulation, there were pockets of elemental currents running together, yet separate. It felt as if there was more than one elemental manipulation at play, yet nothing that fused the combinations. As if two bubbles of separate chakra were travelling together side by side without combining. It was something he had never seen or felt in either lifetime and it was something he would have to ask the summon about—if all continued to go well.

Unfortunately, his examination was cut short when they reached the surface with a final, burst of speed. The grip on him released and Minato instantly clambered to his feet atop the rippling

surface and took a second to breathe heartily. His rescuer was standing a few paces away atop the clear surface of a greenish lagoon, shaking off excess moisture like a dog. The wicked edge of the naginata was held in a loose-gripped paw, but Minato was not deceived by the deceptively gentle posture. Offering a bow of deference to the curious eye, Minato offered his sincere thanks.

"Thank you. I appreciate your assistance. My name is Senju Minato. I am training to be a shinobi of Konohagakure no Sato. I would like to petition for a summoning contract."

"Oho, a would-be-summoner with manners, eh? And you're just a kit. Usually the younglings are boisterous and blustery." The massive summon boomed, voice tinged with humor. "Nice to see a human-kit with manners!"

An enormous, webbed paw pointed to the surface of the rippling water where the smaller otters were clumsily shaking excess water from their fur.

"Kits! Come meet Minato."

Unlike the elder summon, the duo lacked the flawless mastery the larger fellow demonstrated, but made up for it with a wealth of enthusiasm. The pair loped forward, fishing net dragging behind them, and immediately began circling Minato.

"Hi Minato-kit!" A snuffling, damp nose pressed itself snugly into his neck. "I'm Toyushi! I like clams, training with my spear, and cuddling in my nest! I want to be your summon. Can I?"

The eager joy was impossibly infectious. Minato found himself grinning and bumping his chin gently against Toyushi's rubbery nose, while absently scratching his companion's head.

"I'm Yumi!" A cheery voice purred while bunting its head against his hand. "Do you have any oysters?"

To his trained eye, the pair were nearly identical in size and colouring save for light lavender markings under Yumi's eyes, where Toyushi's markings were black to his brown fur.

"I'm sorry Yumi, I don't have any oysters," Minato apologized. "But I'll add it to my list for summoning…if I'm allowed to sign the contract, that is."

“I like oysters,” Yumi chirruped, while using a back paw to scratch the cute little tuft of his ear like a dog.

“Definitely smarter than the last person that entered our realm,” the larger summon harrumphed. “Any normal kit would be assuming they were acquiring the contract. Either that or trying to prove himself in some ridiculous manner.”

“He smells like water! Just like we do!” Toyushi said. “But also—”

“Lightning and…fox?” Yumi visibly shuddered, nose continuing to twitch irritably. “The smell is off though…”

“Oh no! You don’t have fox summons, do you?” Toyushi whined, while his tail swished back and forth furiously. “Say it isn’t so Minato!”

“Psh. Gonna have to buff up your tracking skills if your noses are letting you down with something *that* obvious. That smell is chakra emanations, not a summoning clan. You two have been slacking off in your training!” The colossal otter rapped both kids over the heads with a threatening paw.”

“S-sorry Pa!” Toyushi bawled, skittering over the water to use Minato as a literal human shield. “I won’t skive off again!”

“Me neither!” Yumi peeked from around her tail nervously. “Especially if Minato is gonna be our summoner! We gotta be ready!”

“Quit making assumptions! You don’t have a summoner…yet!”

“But we might!” Toyushi chirped and reached into his fishing net to snag a still wriggling yellow flounder and offering it to Minato. “You hungry?”

“I would, but I’m a bit too nervous to eat!” Minato delayed being served sushi a bit too fresh for his liking. “Thank you, though!”

“Pops, you never introduced yourself.”

“Eh?” A whiskered nose the size of a wagon wheel sniffed. “Suppose you’re right Yumi. We don’t have visitors all that often, Minato-kit. Before I take you to see the Boss, I suppose I had better introduce myself. I am Obutama, father of these rascals and one of the Guardians of Otāragūn.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Obutama-sama.” Dipping his chin, he looked at each of the curious kits in turn. “Toyushi. Yumi. If circumstances allow it, I hope we’ll grow stronger together.”

“Me too, me too!”

Toyushi hopped happily, tipping his head to bunt against Minato’s side eagerly.

“If you’re granted a contract, I would be happy to be called on by you.” The slightly bulkier otter kit, Yumi, spoke proudly. “Though, we may need another year to grow into our skills.”

“Obutama-sama!”

Out of a nest of shrubberies on a nearby embankment, a rather small, well-rounded otter skittered on all fours only to collapse in a heap, just shy of the shoreline.

Toyushi trotted over and splashed his comrade, causing the heaving otter to gasp and leap upright eagerly.

“Obutama-sama! Boss wants to meet…” The otter trailed off miserably, stared numbly at Minato, who offered a nod in greeting, only to meep and tug on his whiskers frantically.

“Breathe before you pass out, Honshu,” Obutama rumbled. “You’re just delivering a message, you’ve hardly been summoned to the battlefield.”

“Sorry, Boss!” The chattering otter’s ears repeatedly twitched as if the poor fellow had been exposed to an active raiton current. “Baba wants to see…” the otter pointed at Minato. “—him.”

“Guess the time for small talk is over,” Obutama stretched and shook himself fiercely, showering the huddle of them with a storm of excess moisture.

“Ack, Pa!” Yumi whined.

“Pipe down, kits.” Obutama said sternly, cowing the recalcitrant pups with a harsh glare. “Now, climb aboard my head, Minato. It’ll make it faster.”

Transcending simple excitement, Minato still recalled the triumph of standing on Gamabunta’s head for the first time. The

moment in the darkness when Kurama permitted Minato to stand atop his shoulders as they forged a new bond, a new partnership.

There was no promise yet, but the thrill of the wind racing through his damp hair, the sensation of the powerful musculature he was standing on. Nothing in the world quite lived up to the nature of a partnership between summons and summoner: giddiness thy name is Minato!

“Yes!” Minato cheered, before sheepishly grinning as the massive otter rumbled in laughter. “I mean, thank you Obutama-sama. I’m just a bit excited!”

“Quite understandable,” the otter laughed good naturedly as Minato raced over the elongated neck to creep up near the comparatively slight ears.

“Us too, Pa?”

“Lazy kits, this is the last time!”

Toyushi and Yumi scrambled up dexterously until they were flanked Minato on either side.

“Don’t fall off.”

The warning was certainly sound as the surface of the water erupted violently with the force of their departure.

It was dangerous, wild, and Minato knew Tsunade would have murdered him if she had witnessed it: Minato was in heaven.

The blast of winds dragging at his skin, clothing, and his hair billowing like a whip behind him. Minato whooped wildly as they descended, only to lift again as the massive summon’s limbs bunched and bounded. The kits, sharing in Minato’s mirth, chortled loudly and clapped their webbed paws together. It was instinctive to shift his weight and adjust his chakra as the summon moved, but it made it no less exhilarating.

“See, we’re heading to the clan grounds! Do you see the waterfalls over there?

Minato shaded his eyes and followed the pointed claw into the distance. Not far off, Minato noted the ridged features of stone shining like obsidian near a source of flowing water that seemed rather large

even from a distance.

“I think so, Toyushi-san,” Minato yelled over the roar of wind. “Is your clan large?”

The otter kits seemed to puff up next to him, which seemed somewhat ridiculous considering they were being buffeted by ferocious winds, that rather mussed their sleek fur.

“We are a large clan and definitely considered one of the most ferocious battle field combatants!” Yumi squirmed eagerly despite the breezy chill. “I’m going to be a battle-summon! That means you’ll be able to call me if you need help, Minato!”

“As if!” Toyushi hissed, long tail swinging up to knock his sibling off-balance with an aggressive swat. “Minato is going to be *my* summoner! I saw him first! That makes him *my* summoner.”

“Uh…”

The waterfall grew larger as they neared their destination, but the squabbling kits hardly seemed to notice.

“Why you! He will not!”

“Will too!”

“With the impression you two are making, I rather imagine Minato will find less dysfunctional summons instead of you two infantile kits,” Obutama rumbled, but Minato was certain he detected a note of fondness amidst the insults. “And keep in mind, Chihiro-baba will be making the decisions. No contract has been signed.”

The ferocious duo instantly seemed to set aside their differences as they turned on their father.

“Now just wait a second, Pa—”

“Minato is gonna for sure—”

“Baba is gonna see—”

“—show all of you!”

Determined to ignore the spat, Minato shook his head and grinned as they came to the end of their short journey and shimmied off the otter with a nimble flip.

“Hey!”

“Wait for us, Minato!”

The two overexcited kits scampered past him toward the base of the waterfall that had steam—an-honest-to-Kami-hot-springs-waterfall—where a number of otters were sporadically gathered.

The nearest otter was wearing a conical hat, fishing pole clutched by one webbed paw, and staring unblinkingly into the steam. Further along the obsidian rock shelf, a large cauldron bubbled over a fire, tended by a horse-sized otter wearing a frilly pink apron.

From this view, he could see an entire island covered with spacious jungles, beaches and forest. There were concentrated groups of chakra signatures in each area. A few were in their vicinity, but it seemed like most of the summons were elsewhere in their tropical paradise.

“Yoshirou-Jiji!”

The otter kits raced past him to the otter wearing the conical hat.

“Hmph, hoped Obutama would lose you in the river,” a grizzled voice muttered, while Minato felt himself eyed up by the deceptively lax otter.

“We have a summoner!” Yumi whooped! “We’ve never had one before, I’m so excited—

“We still don’t have one yet, moron! Chihiro-baba hasn’t met him yet.” Toyushi muttered. “But I’m sure we will!”

“What are you fishing for, Yoshirou-sama?” Minato daringly leapt up next to the summon and peering doubtfully into the water that looked a few degrees shy of a light simmer. Barely.

“Pfft, he’s never caught a thing,” Obutama’s laughter echoed off the walls. “Doesn’t stop the old mammal from trying though.”

“See what sort of hobby you adopt in another century or two,” the old otter reproved with a glower that had the twins cowering backward. “You’re slacking on teaching these boys, Obu!”

“Pa, don’t say that,” Obutama rumbled. “They’re young still.”

“Hmph.”

Even sitting, the old otter was easily triple Minato’s current standing height. The grizzled bits of grey intermixed with the dark brown around the rippling nose and the oversized intelligent gaze was somewhat intimidating with how they seemed to stare right into him.

“Hmm, guess those boys might be right, for once,” Minato shifted uneasily as a clawed paw lazily recast his baited pole into the steaming water. “After you pass Ma’s test, call for me summoner.”

For the first time since meeting them, Toyushi and Yumi were silent.

“I will do so, Yoshirou-sama,” Minato watched the old otter lazily flick his pole back into the steaming water. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“Toyushi, Yumi, wait here with, Pa.”

“But—”

“Pa!”

“I don’t want to babysit.”

The kits arguments were refuted and Obutama shook his head, ushering Minato away from the sulking duo.

“Should I be worried, Obutama-sama?” Minato asked.

“Our Clan has only had one summoner before,” Obutama replied. “Ordinarily I wouldn’t think you’d have a chance, but Pa thinks you do. Maybe you do have a chance, Minato-kit.”

Obutama lead him to where a stout otter with a dark fur coat, and orange markings stirred a massive cookpot over a bonfire. The tufted ears twitched as they approached and a clawed hand absently patted the apron covered in a riot of bright polka-dots over a bright pink background.

In the shinobi world, the most eccentric personalities tended to be the most powerful opponents. The summoning realm was no exception to this rule. Frills or not, this otter was dangerous.

“Oho, a visitor.” A cultured voice acknowledged their approach with a wide smile that showcased rows of aged, but no-less

deadly teeth. “Obu-chan, introduce us!”

“Senju Minato, this is Chihiro-sama, Great Otter—”

Obutama recoiled as the soup ladle swung wide and caught him across his snout. Minato darted off to the side to avoid being trampled by the otter’s massive paws.

“Sheesh, Ma! You’re always so violent! And that damn spoon was hot!”

“Oh, hush dear. We both know that was hardly a bug bite to a big lug like you.” The comparatively diminutive otter patted the larger paw daintily, while shooting Minato and the younger pups a non-subtle wink. “Don’t mind my son, Summoner. The centuries have turned him into a stick in the mud.”

“Ma! Quit embarrassing me!”

“Pish posh! I’m your mother. I’ll never stop embarrassing you.”

“Now, Minato-kun. I really should get to know you,” the old otter paused meaningfully.

“You won’t bother with that unless I’m your summoner,” Minato guessed.

“Quite so! Never see a point in getting attached if I can’t keep you. So! Are you ready?”

If this comes down to a fight, I’ll back you up.

Don’t tell me you’re worried, Kurama.

Hardly.

Keep telling yourself that!

Minato felt like he should feel more intimidated than he was. Though, he supposed he ought to cut himself a teeny bit of slack. After everything he had experienced, what was a little test?

“I’m ready.”

It was true. Minato *needed* this. For all the preparation that was occurring, Minato had felt woefully underprepared. Gaining the

allegiance of a summoning clan would be a significant boon to his training.

Lie to yourself all you want, Minato. But you're a control freak. It's why we're here.

I'm not a control freak. I'm a SUPER CONTROL FREAK!

Minato. Act like Jiraiya again and I'll kill you. Got it?

So cruel, Kurama!

"Excellent!"

The soup ladle swung out like a baton and pointed toward the middle of the falls.

"Just beyond the waterfall, is an old altar. On it, is a stone. Retrieve it and bring it here."

Minato was no Nara, but he enjoyed a test of his mind as much as anyone. Obviously, the test was rigged, it was just a matter of discovering how.

"Retrieve a rock?"

"More like a marble, really," Chihiro gave the soup a good stir.

"Has anyone ever succeeded?"

"Hmph, just the one, I'm afraid," Chihiro chortled.

"How many have made the attempt?" Minato wondered.

"Afraid I've lost count," the old otter remarked with a sly grin that showcased her sharp teeth.

That morsel of information was incredibly telling.

"Time limit?"

"Nope. But once you begin, you're on your own. Complete the task or fail."

"I suppose I better succeed then."

"I do have a good feeling about you, kitling. But I must ask, are you sure you want to attempt this? If you proceed, there will be no reverse summon to see you out of this place."

There was an absence of any emotion save determination. Extending his hand, he offered a thumb's up.

"I thank you for the offer, but I'm not about to give up."

"You're an interesting one, aspiring to such a feat. I hope you pull this off."

With nary a backward glance, Minato stepped onto the surface of the water and immediately assumed a kneeling, meditative pose upon the flowing surface. Assuming a still position, Minato focused on the input from his basic senses.

Detecting chakra was as natural as breathing to a sensor. Detecting chakra abnormalities was another matter. Unlike most innate sensors, Minato had a trump card. A furry, irritable companion that taught him—albeit with an unpleasant, cynical twist—how to improve his abilities.

The chakra emanations from all of the otters are calm. I think we can safely eliminate a possible ambush.

Can you discern their chakra natures?

Why would that be relevant, Kurama?

Whoever said anything about relevance? We've practiced this skill around Konoha, we need to use this opportunity to make you less useless.

Thanks to you, I can differentiate affinities almost every time. Not to mention, we're partners. You'll never let me blunder without berating me for hours.

Your talent fails when it comes across individuals like the Sandaime, who utilizes all the differing elements.

Right, because people like the Sandaime are a ryo a dozen!

Minato, shut up and figure this out.

Are you alright? You seem agitated…more than usual.

Something about this bothers me. You can enter the cave. We'll know for sure one way or another after that.

Alright. I'll be careful.

Minato trotted to the edge of the waterfall. He was already soaked from the force of the frothing spray, but stood unblinking with his hands extended. In an act of pure manipulation, Minato used his chakra to hold the water and lift it upward. There was nothing still about this effort. Water continued to shower downward, only to be held aloft by Minato's proficiency manipulating his element.

Knowing at his current levels of stamina, it was in his best interest to move quickly, Minato surged forward. Ahead of him, an unnatural glow emanated from the dripping cavern maw. The instant he made contact with the cavern, he released his hold on the waterfall.

Ignoring the falling water behind him, Minato was already ascending a poorly formed, cracked stairwell all but invisible beneath moss and algae overgrowth. Barely fifteen meters up, the promised pedestal stood at the end of the incline, surrounded by fragments of bones. The pedestal itself was worn stone with a glowing blue pebble resting innocently atop it.

Rather than feel intimidated, Minato studied the bones of the victims. Most were too degraded, but a few had no obvious injuries. What rusted weaponry Minato could find seemed to be sheathed.

The stone itself had to be the culprit.

Kurama?

If you can't figure this out, you deserve to die.

A little harsh, even if the fox was a believer in tough love.

A cursory analysis suggested no seals. Not that it meant much. In the shinobi world, there were plenty of relics that could perform unbelievable feats. Swords that ate chakra, rituals to seal demons. Obviously, there was something to that here.

Kneeling again, Minato reached again with his senses: nothing, as expected. The bone though…Minato poked at it again, realizing it had a heavier mass than it ought to.

Kurama, it's natural energy. It has to be.

It is.

But why? What could motivate a summoning clan to go to such an extent to prevent working with a summoner?

I don't know. Do you want them as summons?

I like them. After meeting them, I feel they'll have things to teach me.

Then shut up and let's pass this test.

"Alright then," Minato breathed. "Sage Mode it is."

The tingle of natural energy particles greeted Minato like an old friend. Taking care not to get caught up in the rush of euphoria that accompanied Sage Mode, Minato carefully fused a portion of natural energy with his own chakra.

Minato, we'll have just over a minute to maintain Sage mode. At your age, your body will be unable to sustain it for longer than that. That should be more than enough time to grab that thing and get out there.

If someone incapable of moulding sage chakra touched that pebble, they would be dead in seconds. Not a problem for Minato, but…somehow picking it up seemed incomplete.

We're missing the point. This entire task is a lesson in deception. Only a Sage could pick up this stone.

A glance to the bones on the floor, Minato stepped regretfully over the failed aspirants and reached out and plucked the stone off the altar and lifted it up, in hope of sussing out a clue he just *knew* was missing.

Minato.

Maintaining Sage form indefinitely was impossible. In the same way fire beats wind, Uzumaki's loved ramen, and Jiraiya-sensei was a pervert. Assuming a person intentionally left this rock here, they *must* have used senjutsu.

Minato!

The thing that Minato could not swallow was simple: transporting an item that would kill you if you dropped out of Sage Mode was just stupid. Powerful shinobi tended toward arrogance, but someone powerful enough to master senjutsu was unlikely to risk their personal safety.

Underneath the underneath! The intent of the test was…

Of course! Underneath the stone's glow, there were faint black lines suggesting a storage vessel of some sort. The natural energy was a ruse for would-be-summoners to fall into.

Sage damnit! Minato! You're almost out of time, what are you doing?

I'm passing this test.

"Fuin: Reverse Sealing!"

Minato expelled a breath in quiet triumph as the stone disappeared with a poof of smoke, leaving behind a giant scroll.

"The entire trial was a farce. It was about realizing that the stone wasn't the point. All they needed to do was undo a basic storage type seal…" Minato muttered. "Even an individual incapable of manipulating senjutsu could have succeeded. Meaning I succeeded, but in the wrong way."

Well, shit.

Minato.

Recognizing the ominous tone of voice for what it was, Minato grimaced and jerked slightly.

Kurama, please don't be upset. I know I was a bit reckless, but I think—

Minato!

Minato jerked backward, tripping over a skeleton and bruising his bottom on a rather unfortunately shaped rock.

You did okay, figuring out that it was a sealed stone.

Minato grinned.

You're proud of me!

What's there to be proud of? You're a fuinjutsu master that killed himself sealing me? And you almost got yourself killed again, just now. If anything, you're just as bad as those hellions you make us hang around.

No take backs! You're proud of me!

I hate you.

No, you don't!

Sign your contract and go talk to your summons.

I love you too, buddy.

Kurama's only response was unintelligible grumbling.

Unwrapping the bulky, scroll, Minato sliced his finger and signed his name in the second column, next to a name faded and all but illegible from time.

Finally, Minato felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. Acquiring allies and potential instructors was an enormous boon to preventing the coming war. Minato would take it.

Exiting the cave was easier and far less intimidating than entering. Minato simply dove into the water and swam out.

When he reached the surface and trotted triumphantly toward the otter matriarch, Minato patted the summoning scroll that he had slung across his back.

Immediately, the boss otter broke into heaving laughter.

"Welcome, Senju Minato, to Otāragūn! I am Chihiro: Grand Sea Sage of the Otters. We've been waiting for you for a long time, summoner!"

"Minato!"

Minato staggered as Toyushi barreled into his side. Throwing out his arm, he managed to prevent the wriggling youngster from sending him for another swim.

"I can't believe you did it! Now we can go clam diving all the

time!”

“Don’t be silly, Minato is our summoner! He needs us to take care of him, Toyushi!” Yumi scolded her sibling, before nipping Minato’s pantleg gently. “But you can play with us if you want to.”

“Now, kits. No crowding!”

“But Minato is our summoner, right?!” Yumi chirped.

“Yes, kits, Minato is our summoner,” The otter grinned again, eyes twinkling cheerily. “But you boys never mind that. Nobu!”

“Boss?” An otter half his size, with strands of jade beads dangling from his ears eyed Minato speculatively. “I look forward to your call summoner. And should you require it, assisting in instructing you too.”

“The honor is mine, Nobu-sama,” Minato bowed.

“Psh. Honorifics are for the Boss.”

“Nobu, I want to speak to our summoner alone. If you would?”

Before the pair could predictably pipe up in protest, the tiny otter marched off wriggling, protesting kids. Minato suppressed the snort with a bout of well-timed coughs, and shared a smile with Chihiro. At least he didn’t have to worry about offending his summons —yet.

Now that it was just the two of them, Minato turned a sharp eye on Chihiro.

“That was a test doomed to fail,” Minato put the full weight of his disapproval in his words. “I can imagine that all those that tried were overconfident and far too young to have an inkling what they were up against. Testing of that nature is cruel and unusual and I want to know why.”

“How old are you, Minato-kun?”

“Eight,” Minato blurted out, caught off-guard. “I’ll be nine soon.”

Chihiro nodded.

“How old were you before?”

Damn. Don’t play stupid here Minato. You may have signed that contract, but deceiving them isn’t going to help.

I’m aware. If it were anyone else, I would be much more uncomfortable.

“What do you know?” Minato redirected deftly.

A glimmer of approval shone out from the placid eyes, but he jumped slightly when the ladle clanged against the sides of the massive simmering soup as Chihiro stirred the seafood mixture heatedly. With a light clang, she tossed the spoon to the side, doused the fire under the pot with water she dragged from the air—a startlingly mirror of Tobirama’s technique—and nudged Obutama with a paw.

“Obu, the pups are going to be hungry soon. Dinner is done.”

“Got it, Ma.”

The otter tossed her apron to the side and beckoned Minato to follow her, which he did. They walked a short distance away before they stopped in a private area, away from prying eyes.

“That senile old toad, Gamamaru, wasn’t the only one who saw a glimpse of a possible future,” Minato’s jaw dropped slightly and Chihiro nodded with a shrewd look in her beady eyes. “So, I was right. That name does mean something to you. I’ll admit, I was getting a little impatient these last few centuries, but you finally showed up.”

“You knew I was coming?”

“Prophecies are tricky things. And not all of them are destined to come true, but we were told that a summoner older in spirit than body would come seeking aid in preventing a calamity. Our Clan has been training for that eventuality: for you.”

Jiraiya-sensei would have had faith, but Minato had always maintained a healthy vein of skepticism. On the other hand, Chihiro had *known* about him. That left his pragmatism in a bit of a quandary.

“Minato, will you tell me your story?”

Almost before he realized it, Minato found himself speaking.

From his death, resurrection, to reincarnation. Throughout it all, Chihiro said nothing. The old otter listened and occasionally nodded thoughtfully.

Having Kurama talk to was wonderful, but there was an unexpected sense of relief that Minato had finally been able to tell someone. To not have to keep his guard up all the time. It was almost overwhelming.

By the end, Minato's voice was hoarse from speaking and he drank greedily from a basin that Chihiro shoved in front of his face.

"So, saving the world from a dead man with a grudge. Not going to be easy, with what little you know," Chihiro said quietly. "But it can't be easy living your life again. My, that would certainly be something."

"It's certainly been challenging, but I don't regret it." Minato smiled faintly. "I have a chance to make a difference, to preserve the village and the people that I care for."

"You're a good person, Senju Minato. Well-deserving of another chance at life."

"Thank you, Chihiro-sama."

A paw slid around his shoulders and pulled him firmly against the otter's middle.

"You want to stay for supper, kit?"

Ugh! Was it that late already? Oh, no. Oh, no!

"I've got to get home before they figure out that I'm missing," Minato murmured stupidly.

Thank Kami that the adults in his life were otherwise occupied or Minato would be in a world of hurt!

"Oh, Minato-kit. Second life or not, you can't go scaring your family," Chihiro tugged his pony tail reproachfully. "Now, I've got some mouths to feed, so I best send you home."

"You better call those silly kits to play sometime soon! And of course, in a few years, you'll have to call me for training. Call us if you need us, Minato!"

“Right!” Minato straightened. “Thank you, Chihiro-sama!”

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Minato had known that his family members wouldn’t react positively when they discovered that he had performed the summoning jutsu. Logically, Minato understood that there would be repercussions and a considerable amount of outrage and hurt feelings; forgiveness at the expense of permission being the justified mantra Minato rehearsed.

Even a prior life’s experiences proved insufficient preparation for just how *guilty* Minato felt.

As soon as Minato had made it home, he had been assailed on all sides by his frantic family, checked over with healing chakra and a Sharingan, before being marched into the kitchen and unceremoniously deposited in a chair.

To his left, Kakashi was perched on the countertop with his body tensed, as if preparing for an attack. Directly across from Minato, Tsunade caressed the rim of her untouched sake cup with a red fingernail, while staring at him unblinkingly.

Shizune plunked herself down next to Minato and grasped his hand. He swallowed hard when he heard a sniffle and noted how red and swollen Shizune’s eyes were, his face cracking when the woman smiled beautifully, even as another tear dripped from her eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re home, Minato. Please, don’t put yourself in danger like this again.”

Minato’s composure was rattled somewhat and he blinked back a tear of his own, only to jump when Kakashi’s voice cracked like thunder.

“Stupid is more like it. I want to know what the hell you thought you were doing!” Nimble as a cat, Kakashi sprang from his crouch and landed on his feet with anger and hurt—that same pain Minato had seen when Obito…Rin…shit.

“Kakashi! Watch how you’re speaking to him,” Shizune defended him, making Minato feel like a real heel. “He’s only eight! No matter how you want to look at it, Minato’s a child!”
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"Minato may be young, but he knew *exactly* what he was doing. The kid is a genius! We all know he could run circles around his year mates if he chose to," Kakashi looked almost crazed in the low-lighting. "Tell me why a summoning contract is worth losing you?"

The hands squeezing his tightened. "Kakashi, that isn't fair! He's only a child! You can't just put that on him!"

"Kakashi! Shizune!" the solemn authority in Tsunade's voice slammed into all of them, closing mouths momentarily. Here was the Sannin that could have been Godaime Hokage with a straight back and poised expression. "Minato is young, but he is also intelligent and capable of advanced reasoning." Tsunade actually smiled slightly. "Most of the time."

"I'm sorry," Minato's voice cracked.

"I know you're sorry that we're upset. Even knowing that, I can see that you believe it was a good decision." Tsunade lifted her sake cup and swallowed it down. "Minato, we can play this game all day, but I'd rather skip to the part where we discuss the actual issue."

"Actual issue?" Shizune parroted, while Kakashi's brow furrowed slightly.

"What, you two actually think our problem is the little twerp wandering off to the summoning realm?" Tsunade rolled her eyes and refilled her sake cup. "Minato is very good at hiding it, but I've noticed something was off for some time now." She paused to guzzle another cup, a light flush rising in her cheeks. "If I had suspected that Minato would pull a stunt like this, I would have cornered him sooner."

"Nato, is Tsunade-sama, right?" Shizune's face pleaded with him.

Don't lie, Minato.

You want me to tell the truth?

Your family loves you. They would do anything to protect you.

That's quite an endorsement, Kurama.

Besides, the best deceptions are the ones based on the truth.

There's the Kurama, I know and love.

Shut up.

What the hell am I supposed to tell them, anyway?

Be creative. Play on their emotions. Like I said, they'd do anything to protect you. Use that.

"The Kyuubi wants me to train," Minato spun a tale, trying to ignore the niggling worry that this was going to blow up spectacularly in his face.

"What?!" Kakashi was at his side in a flash, hand gripping his shoulder.

"It spoke to you?" Tsunade was on her feet, staring at him with a slightly wild look.

"He pointed something out to me," Minato remarked quietly, carefully gauging the reaction of the three adults. "Whoever wanted the Kyuubi enough to unseal his chakra, is going to come for me. If I'm not strong enough when the time comes, my friends…my family might be hurt trying to protect me. I can't allow that to happen. When the person that wants the Kyuubi comes, I want to be ready."

The three adults looked to be attempting to digest that while not panicking from Minato announcing he was talking with the bijuu.

"Communicating with the fox is something Jiraiya said would happen one day," Tsunade admitted. "I was hoping you would have started puberty first."

"That's why he's been so persistent about training lately," Kakashi spoke aloud, directed at no one in particular.

Tsunade came around the table, picked him up, and held him to her tightly.

"Someone is used to doing things on his own too much," Tsunade's breath tickled his ear gently and Minato's eyes fluttered as she stroked his hair gently. "You have to think, Minato. Don't you know that there is nothing I wouldn't do to protect you?"

"I'm sorry I was reckless," Minato confessed, feeling a need to

do something to earn the forgiveness he didn't deserve. "I've just felt like I haven't been making progress lately. The summoning was kind of a spur of the moment thing."

"Pup," Kakashi's masked nose bumped his face and a gloved palm cupped the back of his neck fiercely. "Promise me you won't do that again. Please."

Minato's eyes scrunched up when he smelled the tears clinging to the fabric of his brother's mask. There was no one he feared hurting more than Kakashi. The man had lost far too much already and he had a tendency to forget just how attached his brother was to him.

"I promise I'll do my best," Minato swore, knowing it was a limited effect, but hoping it wouldn't matter.

Shizune squished herself into their awkward four-way embrace, that was brief but good.

"Is everyone okay now?" Minato asked hopefully. "No one is mad anymore?"

"Oh, I'm definitely mad, squirt," Tsunade smiled faintly. "You're just lucky that I love you as much as I do. As it is, I think we're going to need to be more hands on with your training since you apparently require more supervision than we thought."

"Err…" Minato had definitely been desiring more training, but the ominous aura from his three caretakers was beginning to freak him out a little.

"I have some ideas too," Shizune murmured. "Gonna have to work on your resistances, kiddo."

Kakashi was the last to speak, but his one eye closed in a paroxysm of joy.

"And since you're definitely grounded for at least a year, we'll have lots of time to work on drilling some safety reminders into that brain of yours!"

"Guess that means I'm not going to that sleepover tonight," Minato laughed weakly.

"Definitely not." Tsunade squeezed him harder. "You're going to eat dinner and head straight to bed. And while you're falling asleep,

the adults are going to discuss what exactly your punishment entails."

Minato didn't protest. He more than deserved a bit of wrath, honestly. After a few days—err, weeks, they would cool down again. Hopefully.

Shoved into a chair with a bowl of soup plopped in front of him, Minato began eating before the three-way scrutiny unsettled him any further.

"What summons did you get, Minato?" Shizune asked far too casually to be coincidental.

"Otters," Minato smiled wistfully as he swallowed another spoonful of broth. "If you want, I'll introduce you to Toyushi and Yumi sometime. They remind me a bit of Naruto with their enthusiasm, but it could just be from how young they were. I liked them a lot."

Kakashi seemed overly quiet, a sure sign that his brother was trapped in a personal sort of hell. Minato knew he would have to do something for Kakashi, particularly since it was his fault his brother had been revisited by old ghosts.

"I've never heard of otter summons before," Shizune replied, brow furrowed and expression oddly pinched.

"We'll meet them eventually, but not tonight," Tsunade murmured quietly. "Come give me a hug, then you're off to bed."

Both women embraced him, leaving only Kakashi who declared with distinctive false cheer that he would accompany him upstairs.

Neither of them made a sound, aside from the light brush of sandals on the stairwell, as they climbed the landing to Minato's room. Minato quickly changed into his sleeping yukata and climbed onto the bed. Kakashi wordlessly reclined next to him on the bed and tugged him up until he was pressed into the hollow of Kakashi's throat. Minato's eyes watered again as he noted the involuntary tremors in the arms that wrapped around him tightly.

"Pup, if there is a danger to you, promise me you won't hide that from me again," Kakashi's voice was choked with emotion and Minato's horror he could smell the tell-tale scent of tears leaving his brother's eyes.

Minato's eyes burned and he allowed himself the opportunity to grieve with his brother in shared sorrow.

"I'm sorry, Kakashi." Minato apologized for secrets that he could never reveal and for the hurts he had reopened in a person he loved. "I'm so sorry I scared you." And that it would probably happen again. "I love you and I'm sorry." So sorry, but Minato would do what he must, but maybe he could offer comfort. "I promise not to be so reckless."

"Losing you, you can't possibly know what that would do to me." Kakashi murmured, stroking the back of Minato's hair gently.

The action was impossibly soothing and Minato felt his eyelids droop slightly. There was a hitch in Kakashi's breathing and he felt his body whimper softly in apology. There was an answering rumble from Kakashi's chest that washed a bizarre notion of contentment over Minato's frayed nerves. Without additional consideration, Minato snuggled closer to Kakashi and allowed himself to drift into a comfortable slumber.

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Kakashi lay awake, Minato tucked securely against him, staring up at the ceiling. It had been a mentally strenuous evening, but Kakashi now had some time to mull over the disseminated information and make some decisions.

Minato trusted his bijuu or at least gave credence to a potential threat on his life. That was not something Kakashi was specifically comfortable with, but he was aware that Shiranui Fū was making incredible strides in mastering her abilities as a jinchuuriki since working on building a relationship with the Nanabi. Despite his personal reservations, the bijuu was not the point.

The impressive rate of development Minato demonstrated was the mark of a prodigy, but his pup's obsession with training had been a problem that Kakashi had been monitoring carefully. A desire to become stronger out of necessity, *that* Kakashi could understand. A threat, whether real or imagined, would be the ultimate motivator.

Oh, he was frustrated that Minato had been thoughtless enough to want to handle the problem on his own. Unfortunately, Kakashi's personal history of poor decision making made it impossible
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to blame Minato for irrational thinking.

Hokage-sama would need to hear about this development, which would inevitably result in their meddling leader having a say in the affairs of training his pup and either dissuading or encouraging the relationship between Minato and his tenant.

Kakashi had recognized early on that Minato was reluctant to sign the dog contract. Had been expecting the issue to rise in another few years. Kakashi had been rightfully terrified at how Minato had gone about it, but not surprised.

None of these factors mattered. Not really. If a threat to Minato appeared, Kakashi would be prepared to destroy the individual that tried.

What really bothered him was the unknown.

What else did the Kyuubi know?

Minato-sensei, was there more to that night?

A growl built in his throat, only to be disrupted when the Minato in his arms shivered and whined softly.

"Sorry, pup." Kakashi carded his fingers through the snowy mane of hair, his brother snuffling softly before drifting off again. "I'll protect you."

If something ever happened to you, it would destroy me. I would…

Darker thoughts flashed to that haunting image of a blood-stained blade and his beloved father's slumped, glassy eyes staring forward sightless.

Aa, Tou-san. Losing the Pup would be it for me.

"I'll protect you, Minato."

Obito, Rin, I failed you. I won't fail him.

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Kurama was amused by Minato's parental plight. Over the past
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several weeks, his jinchuuriki had only been left unattended to sleep—though even that privacy was often invaded by Kakashi's paranoid visits.

Despite all their threats, Minato still had frequent visitation with his friends. Kurama had been incredibly amused by the reactions of the boy's group of companions. Reactions ranged from stupefied incredulity to poorly concealed jealousy. To Kurama's joy, Minato had taken to spending longer periods of time in their mindscape together.

Kurama's definition of contentment was defined in its entirety by Minato's existence.

Often, Kurama wondered if the Sage had actually foreseen this relationship, or had it all been left to chance?

The Sandaime had spoken to Minato about his concerns regarding pursuers. The old man extracted a promise about future 'encounters' with Kurama. Not that he or Minato would abide by any of those restrictions, but his jinchuuriki had performed an exemplary job convincing the Sandaime of his little story. And the Yamanaka therapist that just so happened to work for the interrogation division. Kurama's ability to sense intentions confirmed they were in the clear—for now.

Minato was currently tailing Tsunade at the hospital when Kurama heard the shriek.

There was no true sound, only an echo like a string of unravelling memory that came from Kurama's link with his siblings. The passage that connected Kurama to his brothers was like a spider's web. Each bijuu resided at the end and had to navigate the intricate network of connections to reach each other. The greater the distance between them, the more difficult it would be for them to cross the distance.

Difficult, not impossible.

At the present, Minato was in no obvious danger. There was little risk in establishing a connection, but Kurama hesitated. Communicating with his siblings had never been a priority. Kurama had been the strongest, but never emotionally invested.

Now, though. Perhaps that too was different.

The second wave of rage and fear ended Kurama's internal stalemate. With a thought, Kurama connected himself to the path and reached out with the full intensity of his power.

To the North-East, Matatabi and Gyuki were resting, feeling intrigued by their perception of Kurama's presence.

Turning to the South-East, Saiken: burbling with excitement and reaching out curiously toward him, Kurama pulled back but sent a surge of…semi-apologetic sentiment toward the slug. Isobu, but Kurama refused to reach for the sibling that was enslaved by a bastard Uchiha.

South-West: toward his psychotic youngest brother. Shukaku was…happy. What the fuck happened to cause that?

That left the North-West. Kurama threw his concentration and power into crossing the distance and reached out—

Kurama shuddered as he recognized the inhuman scream: Kokuo.

Kokuo!

Kurama poured more effort into connecting with his flailing, frightened brother whose voice felt far fainter than it should.

Kurama? Is that actually you?

Weak. Even a jinchuuriki's death would not have caused the strain he was sensing from Kokuo.

Heh, even that ill-tempered Ichibi recognized me. You surprise me, brother. All these years, I still know your voice.

I didn't expect anyone to come. None of us talk anymore. I haven't spoken to any of you in centuries.

The connection wavered and Kurama was forced to concentrate harder to maintain the link. Yet no matter how hard he held on, it seemed like Kokuo's connection began unravelling anew.

Kokuo wasn't able to reach for him. Their connection was almost completely reliant upon Kurama, something that should be impossible.

Kokuo, what's happening?

My jinchuuriki was ambushed by a pair of shinobi. Their strength was beyond my powers, Kurama. We were defeated and now…they're sealing me, but this isn't normal. I've been sealed many times, but it was never like this.

Ambushed…the shinobi group that wanted to resurrect the Juubi.

It had to be them. Who else could it be?

Kokuo, is there anyway you could disrupt the sealing process and escape?

No. Kurama, I'm trapped and I feel like each piece of chakra they're removing is disconnected. I think…perhaps they're killing me.

They won't kill you—they cannot. They want to restore our progenitor. In order to do so, they need all of us.

Kokuo was quiet, for a moment, but Kurama felt the fear and dread clinging to his brother's words. The anger.

It's too late for me. They've sealed over half my essence away. The rest of them can be saved. Kurama, I never imagined you would come. I never thought…would you warn the others?

I will.

Thank you, Kurama. We were never close. You liked Gyuki, indulged Saiken, and adored Shukaku no matter how much you pretended otherwise. The rest of us, you tolerated. I never would have expected you to change, to care about my distress. Thank you, brother.

It's never too late to change.

Will you stay with me? I don't want to be alone.

I'll stay as long as it takes.

Thank you, Brother. Will you tell me about your life, Kurama?

Kurama did not know how the sealing worked, but if this was his last opportunity to know Kokuo, Kurama would do it. For his brother's sake, Kurama would divulge a truth.

When Jiji promised us, we would understand true strength someday, I didn't understand. That all changed after the Yondaime Hokage sealed me…

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Kurama was exhausted and weary of soul: Kokuo was gone. Where his presence should be in the linked web of connections, only a void remained.

Minato was at the Academy, explaining something or another to a kid that Kurama didn't recognize. Because kindness was a trait Minato retained despite all the aspects of his lives that didn't add up to a happy ending.

Minato was Kurama's happy ending, while Kokuo would never find his.

Kurama would give it a few days before telling Minato. The war they had come to prevent had officially begun: first blood to their enemies.

Excepting Isobu's container, Kurama would reach out to his siblings. If Madara wanted a war, he would have it.

This time, Kurama would be the one to finish it.

Chapter End Notes

To the people that stuck with me, you're all crazy, but I love you! To new readers, thanks for giving me a chance!

My life is back on track and I feel good. I came back to this story wanting to write again instead of forcing myself to. I might be a little rusty, but I hope you enjoy this chapter anyway.

Seriously though, I love all of you. You guys are MY heroes!

Also, if this chapter feels a little rushed, it probably is. The next chapter is my push to genin-hood. I want to get the ball rolling!

Chapter 18: Team Assignments, oh my!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The heat was sweltering for the inhabitants of Kaze no Kuni. The unforgiving nature of desert climate lead to a populace that thrived in the wee hours of the morning and in the afterhours of sunset. When the sun was at its highest, the majority of Suna's residents took refuge indoors.

Unlike their civilian counterparts, shinobi were forced to endure the harsh daytime hours that most would prefer to avoid. It was a long-held belief that the merciless nature of the Suna's surrounding territory produced shinobi of a higher caliber than shinobi from other villages.

A belief Gaara was coming to appreciate as his team trained with Baki outside of Suna.

Each breath of air felt uncomfortably warm as Gaara lazily cycled a waterfall of sand with the most tenuous bit of concentration. At the base of the flow, Temari was attempting to master the second stage of wind manipulation.

Yet a morning of team training and hours of continuous chakra exertion had taken their toll; Temari's face was redder than a beet, her breathing was reduced to laboured panting, and Gaara saw tremors periodically wrack his sister's body. In the last half-hour, Gaara observed his sister's concentration waiver each time she was forced to wipe the sweat off her brow.

Gaara forced himself not to recoil slightly as his sister snarled as her focus slipped *again.*

Taking note of where Kankuro was refilling one of his puppet's senbon launchers, Gaara silently applauded his brother's foresight to place himself a safe distance away from the blonde timebomb stewing below him.

"Not again!" Temari raged as the refined bit of wind chakra slipped away with a light burst of chakra.

Gaara's sleeveless arms extended, vibrant azure whorls on

his arms appeared to almost glow under the glare of sunlight while he concentrated on maintaining the shape of his jutsu. The tattoos on his arms were Gaara's tribute to his relationship with Shukaku. Rasa had argued the design made it easier for enemies to identify Gaara. Not untrue, but Gaara would not be swayed. While not invulnerable, Gaara had worked for years to minimize his weaknesses and become a force to be recommended with. With Shukaku in his corner, identifying tattoos would hardly put him at a disadvantage.

"Temari, you made improvements today, but you're getting sloppy," Baki-Sensei stated unnecessarily to a visibly seething Temari. "Take a break and reflect on what changes occurred when you lost focus."

"Baki-Sensei, I can do this! I almost have it!" Temari's entire body trembled, whether from exhaustion or anger was difficult to say.

Baki merely shook his head and looked up to where Gaara was silently observing.

"Gaara-sama, Temari is done for today."

"I could have kept going! A piddly technique like that was nothing to Gaara!"

A reasonable, if ineffectual argument that Baki would hardly be moved by. From the sullen way Temari was clinging to her battle-fan, his sister knew it too.

With a light shrug, Gaara gradually released his hold on the sand to prevent gusts of wind from blinding them. With a deft leap, he landed next to his sister and felt a twinge of pride as he noticed his sister squeeze her fan with bloodless fingers.

Personal growth was a joint obsession between Gaara and Shukaku. At one time, Gaara had been content with training because it was what Shukaku wanted him to do. As time went by and Gaara tracked his personal growth, each improvement became an achievement—no, a burning *need* to press beyond the next obstacle.

Kankurou was brilliant and possessed a crafty mind, but at times he felt his brother's progress was stagnant.

Temari was a force of nature: Temari was like *him.* Days like today would ultimately push her to become even stronger.

As Baki began reviewing with Temari, Gaara rapidly became disinterested with the scene playing out in front of him. Tuning out Baki's low rhythmic explanation, Gaara turned his focus inward.

Shukaku, are you awake?

Gaara's mindscape was grey, with flashes of black here and there. It was desolate and reinforced his belief that Shukaku had been lonely in the emptiness of his mind.

Two years into their relationship, Shukaku had confessed to Gaara that their seal was imperfect. Having never known anything different, Gaara had been unsure what exactly that entailed. As time went by, he came to believe the seal was like shoving a square peg into a round hole. As he paid attention, Gaara noticed the chakra flow between Shukaku and himself was sluggish like a river of molasses. This effectively caused Shukaku to shunt huge amounts of chakra to Gaara, but only receiving perhaps two-thirds of the benefit. At times, Shukaku's ability to perceive the outside world simply ceased to exist, leaving his friend reliant on auditory cues.

All in all, Gaara's seal was a hot mess. A mess that Shukaku hinted could only be fixed by a jinchuuriki from Konoha, though his friend became cagey when he attempted to press for additional information.

As time passed, he concluded that Shukaku had experienced some form of mental trauma caused by repeated, amateur sealing. Not an expert in the obscure art, Gaara lacked definitive proof but speculated that the effect was akin to long-term mental abuse in humans.

That belief at the forefront of his mind, Gaara resolved to make Shukaku's existence as pleasant as possible.

Whether or not Shukaku's perception of the world would change over time, Gaara didn't know. What he did know was that his friend possessed an interesting perspective on morality, low tolerance for any perceived slight, and extreme mood swings. On the other hand, Shukaku responded well to praise, was a good conversationalist if the right topic was broached, and was fiercely protective of anything and anyone he deemed his.

Gaara refused to treat Shukaku as anything less than an equal. Shukaku was not a monster, he was his best friend. They were

partners: it was that simple.

Hence, Gaara had informed his father that he required all the shinobi to address his partner with the respect appropriate to a protector of the village. To this day, his father's left eye twitched whenever someone mentioned Shukaku's name with attached honorifics.

From the back of his mind, Gaara felt a burbling whine echo in his mind.

Gaaarrrraaa, I'm bored. Why can't we start yet?

Gaara chuckled fondly at his best friend's antics, used to the baffled looks all of Suna directed his way when he conversed with his bijuu. His behavior inspired fear in some, concern for his mental state from most, and a select few learned to accept it.

Opposite of shame, Gaara flaunted his oddness and stonewalled anyone that spoke against himself or his friend.

Don't worry, Shukaku. We'll train together soon.

Waiting is boring. I want to blow something up.

We definitely can blow up some dunes around here, but we need to wait.

Why should we?

Placating Shukaku was an everyday occurrence. For his peace of mind, Gaara had mastered the art of redirection. In this particular case, the Kazekage's presence was a juicy morsel to dangle in front of his overeager friend.

The Daimyo is coming to see what we can do and the Kazekage will be with him. Can you imagine how nervous he'll be?

Kehehehe, excellent! We'll give him a show! And we'll show that puny gold dusting fool a thing or two about power! Shaaaaa!

Did you forget the best part, Shukaku?

Hmm…tell me.

You told me the Kyuubi and his host haven't—

AHA!

Gaara smirked.

Gonna pound that conniving bastard! Ha! Telling us that his host is stronger! Gonna rub it in that nasty fox's face while you nap tonight! Hopefully we can see them in person and crush them like an egg!

Shukaku *mostly* allowed Gaara to sleep six hours a night, but his bijuu was rather unpredictable. If Shukaku was unable to rest, Gaara was going to be awake for the ride. Again, it didn't bother Gaara. A restless night or two was nothing to a jinchuuriki, especially compared to the value of providing Shukaku with companionship when he needed it.

Oi, Gaara. Give Temari our gift!

Gift? Oh. Right.

Thanks for reminding me.

Removing a scroll from his bag, Gaara unsealed a katana crafted of costly chakra metal, that he had liberated from a Kumo infiltrator a few weeks ago, and a pair of canteens.

"Temari," Gaara extended his hand, offering an uncapped canteen to his sister.

"Oh, thanks, Gaara."

Temari wasted no time chugging a few swallows, her colour improving as she relaxed.

Gaara flexed his fingers around the sword's guard. They had only a short time left before Rasa would be arriving with the Daimyo. If Gaara's demonstration with Shukaku went well, Rasa believed an opportunity to re-establish commerce and expand their military power would finally be possible.

He could see the wisdom in pursuing the opportunity that Gaara and his team had provided their village.

Gaara's team had been on a simple C-rank survey mission a month prior, when a miracle landed in their laps. A pair of missing-nin had kidnapped the Wind Daimyo's favorite daughter and were

running for the border. Gaara had easily intercepted the pair and become the hero to an ecstatic but highly clingy four-year old. That rescue prompted the first visit to Sunagakure from their Daimyo in nearly a decade.

Baki talks too much. Always about boring things too.

Baki is intelligent and has always respected our power, without bending to accommodate us. I appreciate his forthright behavior and benefit from his instruction.

Ha! I already taught you how to manipulate futon chakra.

You did. It would have been much harder if you hadn't provided insight.

Shukaku made a low sound like a cat purring.

"Yo!" Kankuro skidded down a dune to where they were loosely grouped. "You guys actually accomplish anything, or did Temari just throw a hissy fit?"

"As if you could do any better, moron!" Temari snapped back. "All you do is sit around playing with your puppets! Maybe if you get off your lazy ass and practice your taijutsu for once, I might take you seriously!"

Mari-chan is so feisty! I love it when people underestimate her!

It was a peculiar thing, but Shukaku adored his sister. That bizarre infatuation began when two genin had the poor misfortune of making a snide comment about Gaara in front of Temari. The pair had been unable to walk-away under their own power and both had bloodied faces, a few teeth knocked out, and several lacerations. Since that initial display of brutality, Shukaku had become his sister's personal cheerleader and supported Gaara's efforts to help her become stronger.

She's scary either way. I've come to understand females have a unique ability to inspire fear. Perhaps an innate genjutsu ability.

Give her our present! Learning to manipulate a blade should make the waterfall exercise far more instinctive. Besides, without that fan Mari-chan is easy pickings. If she has both she'll be a killing machine!

Baki-Sensei uses blades to maximize damage with futon jutsu to significant effect. If Temari augments her fan with a blade, she would have little to no trouble with most opponents. It also removes a glaring weakness in her current specialization.

All the better to squish insects. Give it to her and tell her to stop sucking! We can't be seen with more embarrassments!

Kankuro isn't perfect, but he is quite skilled.

And when I destroyed his puppets with a tail thump?

Understood.

Kehehe!

Tact was another skill Yashamaru had painstakingly fought to teach Gaara. Apparently Shukaku's blunt delivery left much to be desired. Nevertheless, tact did not come naturally to Gaara.

"Temari," Gaara wrestled with his tongue and grimaced when the rest of his team turned to stare at him.

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Here."

Temari caught the katana on reflex, but looked from him to the blade with a perplexed look.

"A sword?"

"Shukaku and I think Baki-Sensei should teach you kenjutsu."

Gaara sighed as Temari went oddly still and seemed to be studying him rather intensely.

"Why?"

Gaara pretended not to notice how Baki and Kankuro took a noticeable step backward.

"It should help with elemental manipulation," Gaara replied calmly, feeling somewhat gratified by the shared looks of relief between Baki and Kankuro. "Also, your subpar skills in close combat are a significant concern. Shukaku and I observe that you easily

overpower any opponent from range, but if you're unable to maintain distance, your opponents tend to defeat you too easily. To that extent, extra training in physical conditioning and kenjutsu would likely see significant benefit."

For a long moment, no one said anything. A lack of reaction seemed a positive, so Gaara tentatively felt accomplished.

See, a little tough love works miracles! It worked with you after all!

Gaara scarcely was able to bask in the pride of a job well done, before his automatic defense kicked in as Temari launched projectiles at his face.

"My combat skills are subpar, are they?! I'll show you!"

After a significant amount of mediation from Baki, coupled with several minutes to cooldown apart, Gaara was sitting next to Kankuro a short distance away feeling frustrated and confused.

"I wasn't trying to upset her," Gaara sulked. "Shukaku and I just wanted her to be an even better kunoichi."

Kankuro sat next to him tinkering with something or another.

"You did a better job than you used to, but our sister takes criticism pretty hard. If Shukaku or you had suggestions for me, I could handle that way better."

"Is that so?"

Puppet boy is delusional.

It seems likely.

"Tch, anything you got, bring it, Gaara." Kankuro stared him down.

Hmm, he did ask for it. Tell him he's a one-trick pony that sucks. Also, I hope he gets lost in the desert and we don't have to drag his useless carcass on missions anymore.

Shukaku did *not* like his brother. Unlike the incident with his sister that clearly defined Shukaku's infatuation with Temari, Gaara really didn't understand the mutual enmity between the tanuki

and his brother.

"Kankuro, I could defeat you with my sand easily," Gaara attempted to reason with his brother, to little effect. "What happens when someone uses elemental jutsu to compromise the terrain? You would be defeated easily."

"Tch, as if. That's what I have you and Temari for."

I know you said your siblings are off limits, but it would feel so nice to bury that moron.

You have a point. Kankuro tries my patience at times.

"Shukaku wants to kill you for being an idiot," Gaara mentioned casually.

Gaara ignored the obnoxious gagging from his brother.

"I'm not saying that specializing in puppetry is a foolish decision," Gaara freely complimented his brother. There were at least a dozen puppeteers in Suna's active shinobi forces, but many lacked his brother's creativity. "But a day may come when you wish you had expanded on your specialization."

Gaara looked up. The sun began its descent on the western horizon, but beyond the dunes he could see Rasa approaching with the Daimyo and a limited accompaniment.

Moving to greet him, Temari and Kankuro fell in to flank him from either side. If their previous interactions were still bothering them, the pair of them were performing admirably as they moved to greet and bow to the group.

The Daimyo's impractical garb with its costly golden thread sparkled, making it seem like the rotund figure was swathed in sunlight.

That guy is important?! He looks like a chump we should be dumping in a retirement home! Oh man, I want to eat this guy more than the Kazekage.

Gaara's lips twitched.

"Daimyo-sama, it is my honor to introduce to you my youngest son, Gaara." Rasa comported himself with expected decorum

as was expected from one leader to another. “In honor of your visit, he has requested we observe his latest accomplishment.”

This is booooring.

Politics are boring, but necessary apparently.

Humans are weird.

Yes.

“Kazekage, your son is the one who rescued my Tsukimi-hime?”

“Otou-sama, wait!”

Off a second litter that had just finished being lowered, a familiar figure wrapped in lavender and white silks dashed toward them.

The shinobi guarding the pair murmured in dismay as the pint-sized girl wasted no time blasting aside decorum and loping between the Daimyo and Gaara.

“Gaara-kun! I came to see you!”

“Tsukimi-hime, it’s a pleasure to see you under more welcoming circumstances,” Gaara shot Rasa an uncertain look, taking comfort at the short nod his father offered. “I was unaware that you had accompanied your revered father.”

You’re talking all stuck-up. I don’t like it.

I don’t either.

“Did you miss me?”

Overwhelmed by physical proximity and Shukaku’s chortling, he felt a wave of relief when Rasa rescued him.

“Gaara has spoken of his encounter with you often, Tsukimi-hime,” Rasa’s response appeared to have pleased the girl because a grin split her face from ear to ear. “With Daimyo-sama’s permission, I would be pleased to arrange for Gaara to show you around Suna shortly. But first, allow Gaara to demonstrate his talents for your father.

"Ah, I suppose!" For some reason, Tsukimi seemed dispirited, but the Daimyo was nodding agreeably already.

"Yes, indeed. Let us view this demonstration so that we may return to the village for the evening banquet. I am quite famished after that ride!"

We could lop him in half. I bet we could feed the entirety of Suna with all that blubber.

That may be a bit of a stretch.

Perhaps his sense of humor had become a tad bit darkened after long-term exposure to Shukaku.

"I will arrange to have your meal awaiting your return," Rasa assured the Daimyo who patted his daughter's head fondly. "Gaara, please show us what you and…Shukaku-sama have accomplished."

Yahoo! That two-bite loser has finally acknowledged my superiority!

"As you wish," Gaara said, bowing deferentially to the Kazekage and his Daimyo.

Gaara vanished and reappeared a short distance away. Nothing mattered except this moment. Imperfect transformations were a thing of the past. This time…it was all in.

You ready to strut some stuff, Shukaku?

Yahoo!!!! Let's do it! I wanna blow something up!

Faintly, Gaara heard exclamations of shock, but they were far distant, far beyond his caring. Gaara cloaked himself entirely in chakra and pushed his body to alter shape.

Shukaku's enormous frame shook itself like a dog. Before he could suggest a course of action, Gaara felt Shukaku gathering the chakra at their mouth and shooting it into the distance to the shocked exclamations of their spectators.

Watch this, suckers! Tremble before our awesome! Wahahahahaha!

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Standing atop the Yondaime's head, Shisui looked down on the village of his birth. Below, civilians coexisted with their shinobi counterparts, a mutual level of trust and respect that was absent from most of the hidden villages.

After everything he'd seen, it felt like peace.

Whenever he returned to Konoha, Shisui paid homage to the four carved faces that perpetually watched over his home like sentinels. It was a tradition that started shortly after his tutelage under Jiraiya concluded, continuing as he was deployed with ANBU and espionage missions alike.

The Sandaime's head was for days that Shisui felt weighed down by the burden of knowledge he relayed to his Kage and the price of silence. For days of optimism and accomplishment, Shisui chattered away to the Shodai Hokage until his voice grew hoarse. If a mission left nothing in his stomach but bile, Shisui begged for absolution from the Nidaime's silent visage. For days such as today, that Shisui dared to plan for the future, the Yondaime's spikes served the dual purpose of inspiration and cautionary tale.

Like most Uchiha, Shisui was a shitty sensor. For the most part, finely honed instincts made up the difference.

Shisui lifted his hand into the sky and waved lazily to his company.

"Predictability is dangerous in our line of work, Shisui."

"About time you turned up, Itachi," Shisui mock-pouted, flashing his cousin a grin. "I've been back almost an hour."

"Delegation of authority only goes so far, my friend."

The younger man would never be tall, but there was an aura of command emanating from Itachi's lean figure. Itachi had shed Uchiha standard clothing for Konoha's jounin uniform, with his hair in a low tail that always failed to contain the bangs framing a smiling face.

There was an unspoken ability to perceive the ability among top tier shinobi: the ability to measure an opponent's skill with just a look. Shisui could discern with a glance that, in his year away,
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Itachi had become an apex predator.

Glancing from the Yondaime and back to Itachi, Shisui nodded decisively.

"When's your face going up, Godaime-sama?"

"In six months, after the Chunin Exams," Itachi's words bounced on the wind, a hand rising to shade his eyes from the sunlight. "I will be announced as the successor privately to the upper echelons within Konoha ahead of time, but the majority of our forces will learn of it when the Sandaime steps down."

The news would surprise no one. A Kage took an apprentice for one purpose only: time was the sole mitigating factor.

"Are you ready?"

Itachi's lips eased into an almost wistful smile, the spell of peace vanishing as clouds appeared in the younger man's eyes.

"No."

"You have some sense then," Shisui stated sadly, but a bitter edge of sarcasm creeped into his words. "Just remember that you won't be alone. I've got your back and you have support like no Hokage *ever* had."

Such a comment would have likely ended with Shisui tarred and feathered, but he felt it was accurate. A great internal shift had occurred within Konoha; his clan, once reviled, had finally settled inside Konoha with their elders' prejudices shunted firmly in the past.

There was still squabbles over petty things and dissent from the old guard, but the younger generation had finally begun to *live* the dream of unity Konoha had been founded upon.

"Thank you for your support," Itachi said after a long moment, Shisui observing a deep furrow in his cousin's brow.

"What is it?"

"I understand there is no shame in knowing one's limits, but…"

"But?" Shisui prompted.

“When I am Hokage, I will perform my duties to the best of my ability,” Itachi spoke with quiet resolve and a touch of sadness. “But sometimes I wish I had never been considered for the role."

As a cousin, Shisui wanted to react accordingly, but as the man Jiraiya had moulded him into, Shisui mulled the statement over before speaking. Immediately it was clear to him that Itachi was not trying to escape the perceived “yoke,” but neither was he resigned to his fate. Whatever this bizarre confession *was*, Shisui’s gut told him this was something far more compelling than Itachi expressing self-pity.

“Why do you feel that way?” The question was delivered with care and stuffed with as much support as he could convey with simple words. “Because I’m not one to play to anybody’s ego, but I’m not sure I understand the problem. I thought you wanted to be Hokage.”

“I know that I’m strong enough,” Itachi replied with unexpected confidence. “I have excellent comrades and perhaps even a soundly tactical mind. However, I’m not sure I’ll be willing to pay the cost when the time comes.”

No one truly understood the burden of taking lives until they had done so. No amount of mental preparation really made up for it. A Hokage’s role carried a heavier price. Shisui knew that, understood that Itachi had an unfavorable disposition for the role.

Except…Shisui studied Itachi intensely for a moment.

“My perception of the world has changed a lot since training with Jiraiya,” Shisui said carefully. “Leaving taught me how little I understood of the real world. I can hardly fathom what becoming Hokage ultimately *means.* The responsibility of so many lives is an unmeasurable burden of conscience.”

“Then you understand why I would be reluctant to accept such power,” Itachi smiled almost sardonically and Shisui felt himself taken aback when his cousin’s eyes melted into a perfect Mangekyou shaped like shuriken.

Shisui jerked forward, feeling his gut tighten in anguished sympathy. Those eyes were a blight on the Uchiha. Such a harsh perspective of the Sage’s gift would cause a clan riot, but it was the truth. The price for power often decimated the soul.

“The Nidaime called our eyes the curse of hatred,” Itachi folded his arms around his middle and looked down toward the village. “I understand where the name comes from now. But more than that, hatred can only exist in the absence of love.”

Uchiha were not exactly known for being rational, Itachi certainly had a point. But still…

“Did you lose someone?” Shisui felt unnerved asking.

“Almost.” The reply was hoarse and weak. “I thought I lost her.”

Shisui’s jaw slackened and it took all of his willpower to keep himself upright and not tumble straight down the cliff-face.

Lost her. Itachi…oh Kami. His cousin had gone and fallen in love while he was gone. And—never said anything!

Shisui desperately wanted to hound Itachi for answers until he spilled the beans on this girl, but unfortunately duty before pleasure. Besides…he was a master sleuthing shinobi. Digging up some information on a kunoichi Itachi liked couldn’t be too difficult.

“Wait,” Shisui ran a hand through his hair and smothered a groan. “What does that have to do with you not wanting to be Hokage?”

“I realized that my love was stronger than my devotion to reason.” Itachi’s snapped, causing Shisui to throw his arms up in a surrendering recoil. “How can I be Hokage when I would burn the world to the ground for the people I value most?”

Huh. Itachi had inherited the Uchiha tendency for drama after all. What a bummer.

“Okay, enough of this self-doubting, wallowing crap,” Shisui snapped his fingers in his cousin’s face, feeling better when the glower vanished from his cousin’s face. “If we really are screwed by a so-called ‘curse of hatred,’ there is no reason to fuel that fire. Now just listen to me, Itachi.

“I’ve been on some shitty missions. Ones that awakened my own eyes, that tore my soul apart. I understand what it is to want to take revenge, to value others over myself. But you’re looking at that like it’s a bad thing.”

Seeing Itachi looked mostly unconvinced, he rolled his eyes and cursed genetic pigheadedness. Yanking Itachi by the ponytail, he jerked his future Hokage to the edge of the cliff.

"Whenever I come home, good mission or bad, I see this," Shisui released Itachi and threw his arm out, laughing as a balloon floated up from the ground above a squalling toddler below. "I want to do what I can to protect these people. I've walked into the darkness so that none of them have to. Because every single one of these people are my family. And *nobody* screws with my village and lives to tell the tale."

"You know, that's pretty much the will of fire in a nutshell," Itachi remarked dryly. "You sure you don't want the hat?"

"No," Shisui shook his head soberly. "A few years ago, you would have been a shit Hokage. You would have accepted the role and maybe done a half-decent job. Back then, your thinking was far too linear; from my perspective, your thinking was like plotting a course on a map and refusing to deviate, even when presented with potential outcomes that should have rocked your moral foundations. For all my visual prowess, I couldn't see what changed in you.

"Now…I think I might see."

It was a harsh statement. Perhaps a tad bit more honest than Shisui should have been, but a piece of Shisui had broken when the kind-hearted cousin that had toddled after him adoringly disappeared behind an emotionless veneer. Shisui had despaired at the amount of pressure Fugaku placed upon his heir. And guiltily relieved with his death.

"I'm happy now."

Simple words that packed a hell of a wallop.

"Are you?" Shisui choked.

Itachi's smile was beatific, face highlighted by streams of sunlight.

"I never sought to become Hokage, but I agreed to train because it was what was expected," Itachi returned almost wistfully, his attention straying to their village below. "My best friend taught me that experiencing happiness is not the same thing as living it."

Shisui followed Itachi's gaze to the ground, past a pair of patrolling shinobi, a few civilian nobodies and—jumped. Shisui circumspectly checked to make sure the long-legged girl was the one Itachi was creeping on and—yep. Damn! A tanned kunoichi with a white and blaring orange crop-top, covering up some pretty nice cleavage, over a white skirt with heeled sandals. And green pigtails with—giant dango-stick hair pins?! What the actual fuck?

Needing some sort of explanation for the definitely-not-a-mirage kunoichi that hadn't vanished after a surreptitious kai, Shisui full-body turned and his jaw dropped.

It was like a scene from his book-that-he-certainly-wasn't-publishing. The intense genius type was attracted to a vibrant, vivacious woman who had come into his life and…

Taught him how to live.

Shisui looked back to the boisterous teen below. Younger than Itachi, but not by much. The girl below radiated joy as she held a book in her hands—waving it teasingly in the direction of a taller redheaded boy. The girl twirled behind her other companion when the redhead lunged at her.

"When do I get to meet her?" Shisui asked just a little breathlessly, not bothering to explain since self-denial was not typically Itachi's modus operandi.

"Who knows?" Itachi smirked cryptically. "For now, she's just my friend."

"For now," Shisui agreed mischievously. "But I sense a plan in the works."

Itachi's smirk widened.

"No plans. I'll allow her to decide for the both of us."

"Holy shit," Shisui gaped. "This girl must be something else. You've never…really bantered with me. I mean…I've talked *at* you. But this is totally new territory!"

"You're insufferable as always. How have you been, Shisui?"

"Ah, set up some potential meetings with a contact for two

months time," Shisui kept things deliberately vague. Paranoia was a staple of a successful spy, unlike Sensei, Shisui never allowed himself to believe there wasn't a possibility of being overheard. "Worked on some writing—"

"Why *do* you write?"

"Why do people read?" Shisui shrugged away from the dark scowl of disapproval that devoured Itachi's good humor. "I find it relaxing and like anyone, I need a diversion that isn't somehow tied into being a shinobi. Unlike Jiraiya-Sensei, I'm not really into writing erotica for the sake of it. I just like to come up with ideas. And, sure, I'm a bit of a romantic, but more in a wants-to-be-swept-off-my feet-sorta way. You know…"

"As long as I don't have to read complaint reports from the bathhouses, I don't mind you writing."

"You will," Shisui shivered as the Shinigami turned its unholy attention his way. "But not from me! Just from Jiraiya-Sensei."

"Fine," Itachi folded his arm. "I'm going to have to get back soon. Kage Bunshin are effective, but only to a point."

That was a total bummer, though, that reminded him…

"Itachi, what do you do for fun?" Shisui asked, delighting in the startled look on his cousin's face. "You must have some sort of diversions besides training."

"If I did," Itachi deliberately seemed to be angling his face away. "I wouldn't tell you."

"Hot damn," Shisui muttered. "You've become really sassy since I've been away, Itachi! Secrets aren't nice though, tell me!"

"Perhaps another time," Itachi's humor dissipated and his posture shifted in a way that had Shisui pulling back and providing expected space to a superior. Itachi was discreetly activating minor privacy seals and his cousin was suddenly all-business. "Pleasantries aside, I had another reason for seeking you out.

"Uchiha Shisui," Itachi invoked a tone of voice that instantly had Shisui jerking to attention. "Report."

The Sandaime had authorized Itachi's clearance level and

now only the Hokage ranked above his cousin's authority.

"Orochimaru has done an excellent job evading our tracking teams," Shisui relayed calmly. "I've discovered why."

Shisui held up a scroll and tossed it to Itachi who snatched it out of the air, only to eye it suspiciously.

"And this is…?"

"I tracked Orochimaru to an area just outside Kusagakure. With my specialized jutsu, I was able to witness something I definitely wasn't meant to see. What I can tell you is that Orochimaru has perverted the laws of nature," Shisui squeezed his fingers into his palms and traded a look with Itachi. "Somehow…he is taking over the bodies of other people. I've never seen anything like it and I hope I never do again. In the scroll, I recovered what was left of the prior host body. I doubt you'll get anything off of it, but if anyone can, I expect our experts could."

Shisui didn't need to see Itachi's expression to sense how unsettled his cousin was. Understandable really, creepy ethic bending psychopaths had a habit of being unsettling.

"A shinobi of Orochimaru's caliber would be able to conceal his chakra from most sensors. Combine that with literally possessing the body of another person and it's rather easy to understand why we've had such difficulty tracking him down."

"I know that you recalled Jiraiya-sensei too, but I think you should be careful what you tell him," he said, refusing to acknowledge the guilt of going behind his mentor's back.

"I hope you're not implying that Jiraiya-sama is unable to deal with traitors, Shisui."

"Bah, should have known I'd botch up the explanation," Shisui muttered. Lifting a hand toward his distinctly unamused cousin, he made a placating gesture. "Look, Sensei understands that Orochimaru is a traitor. In fact, if Orochimaru were openly attacking Konoha, Jiraiya would be the first to risk his life. There will never be a more loyal shinobi than him."

"And yet?" Itachi prompted unnecessarily.

Rubbing the back of his eyelids with his wrist, Shisui sighs.

“Geez, Tachi,” he muttered. “I find it hard to believe you that just a few minutes ago you weren’t sure you were going to be Hokage. Now look at you! Giving me scary looks and—”

“Shisui!” Itachi glared. “Explain!”

I’m sorry, Jiraiya.

“Hesitation is the failure that can overthrow the most powerful of shinobi.” Shisui exchanged a meaningful look with Itachi, noting that the other’s rigid stance had relaxed. “Jiraiya is loyal and would kill Orochimaru if he had to, but I could see him hesitate, even if he didn’t intend to. For the sake of Konoha, it’s my official recommendation that you send me. I have no positive memories holding me back.”

“The Sandaime and I will consider it, but you must know my authority is not final in these matters. Not yet, anyway,” Itachi said after a pause. “Is there anything else urgent?”

“Suna’s going to be a wildcard in the next few years,” Shisui grunted. “I have confirmed that their jinchuuriki has somehow managed to retain control of his bijuu’s transformed state.”

“This is certain?” Itachi looked absolutely baffled, with good reason. Suna’s sealing experts were notably subpar and their jinchuuriki were known for being particularly unstable.

“Yes,” Shisui nodded grimly. “Just adding to that little hornet’s nest, their Daimyo is probably going to restore funding to Suna. I didn’t stick around to find out for sure, but I’d say it’s a practically a sure thing.”

In a perfect world, a prospering ally was something to be praised. Unfortunately, reactions of the other great nations may be more problematic. If Suna got dragged into war, Konoha would be obligated to assist. As a weak ally grew in strength, so too their ability to demand greater favor in return for loyalty. Alliances were complex fragile things and they rarely lasted from one generation to the next.

“Thank you for your report,” Itachi murmured. “I’m sure the Sandaime and I will have much to discuss.”

“So…since you called me back all this way for the big day,” Shisui planted his hands on his hips and grinned comically. “Let’s talk genin teams!”

“I already told you that you’re taking a team,” Itachi replied dismissively.

“And?” Shisui prodded. “I submitted a request for the team I wanted over a year ago! You *know* that team dynamic would be amazing!”

“Sandaime-sama was not impressed with the lack of kunoichi,” Itachi deadpanned.

“All right! You got my team approved!” Shisui whooped! “Team Shisui is going to kick ass!”

“And your spy network?”

“Psh, I already told you how I’ll work that out. Don’t worry so much, you’ll get grey hair and put-off that girl you want to date.”

“Shisui, be serious.”

“Alright, alright, you’re a stick in the mud sometimes, sheesh!” Shisui rolled his eyes fondly. “I suppose Jiraiya-sensei has already sent in the report about that group…Akatsuki.”

“That group has raised a number of red flags from the intel departments,” Itachi grimaced. “S-rank criminals typically are too paranoid and motivated by self-interests to come together for a common purpose. For shinobi of that caliber to form a coalition that has so quickly gained a reputation for mission completion is impressive and worrying.”

“Honestly, we’re flying a little blind when it comes to them. Between the two of us, Jiraiya and I have squat. That organization may have high-profile members, but aside from sporadic sightings, we have nothing. No list of members. Very little on potential strongholds. No contacts. Whoever is heading that group is far cleverer than I’m comfortable with.”

“The lack of information is troubling. Ideally, it would be useful to have an informant, but infiltrating an S-rank organization isn’t feasible without measures that the Sandaime and I won’t sanction.”

“I’ll keep an ear to the ground, Itachi-sama,” Shisui offered a slight bow and a crooked smile when Itachi flashed an annoyed look his direction.

“I’m not the Hokage.”

“Not yet,” Shisui agreed. “But in the meantime, do you want to spar?”

“Hmm,” Itachi grimaced slightly. “Yes. I could use your insight to improve.”

“Difficult to improve upon genius and that craziness Gai inflicted on you, but what the hell! Let’s dance!”

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Even if the grunt work of catheters, bedpans, and medical charting were eliminated, practicing medicine would never be a passion for Minato. To his consternation, medic training had not required enthusiasm. Compulsive perfectionism issues coupled with his eidetic memory were more than enough to ensure Minato learned and memorized everything Tsunade threw at him.

Well, that *and* a bombshell Kurama dropped on Minato just after his tenth birthday.

Following a particularly harrowing session attempting to refine his chakra control for medical jutsu, Kurama cagily suggested he may have some material that may help. Intrigued, Minato had joined his friend in their mindscape where Kurama conjured up partially completed notes on a seal that was intended to artificially constrict a chakra pool to enable an individual to perform techniques that required more precise chakra control.

The conversation that followed had quickly turned into the first real argument between Minato and Kurama since becoming friends. For Minato’s part, he’d expressed disbelief that Kurama failed to mention—in the span of a couple decades—that viewing portions of memory was possible. Offended, Minato had argued that every aspect of his life was available for Kurama at every single moment without restriction. Kurama had called him an ungrateful brat and locked him out of his own seal for days.

It had taken over a week of persistent haranguing and tearful apologizing before the fox had dragged him into the seal, scooped Minato into his paws, and shook him until it felt like his brain
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was about to leak out his ears.

After a long discussion, Minato added Mito to the list of touchy subjects to avoid discussing with his best friend. Despite Mito's blacklist status, Minato had been allowed to look at Kurama approved pieces of the Uzumaki's work. Most of the materials, unfortunately, were related almost solely to prison or chakra suppression. What knowledge he had been able to glean was incredibly limited and not the reservoir of abilities that Minato had expected from a legend of her caliber. Upon hearing his confusion, Kurama had merely snorted and stated that people rarely lived up to the myths. His friend had also pointed out that the Nidaime had learned the basics of Uzumaki sealing before creating an ability that elevated his status to one of the most powerful shinobi to ever have lived. In turn, Minato had taken the Nidaime's technique and single-handedly ended the Third Shinobi War. Neither of them had been Uzumaki, but both of them had achieved notoriety that transcended the clan that was famous for sealing.

They may not have invented the wheel, but they made it better.

Mito's seals, while powerful and showed great technical ability, lacked the spark of innovation Minato had discovered while examining Tobirama's notes on sealing. Still, Mito's insights offered a starting point in the creation of a seal designed to constrict chakra flow to make medical jutsu possible. The original design was crude and unfinished, but it had been a starting place.

Redesigning matrices and creating a sequence of seals for adapting to Kurama's chakra rather than suppressing it and... bingo!

And so, Senju Minato had crafted his first "official" seal. A damned healing conversion seal usable only by himself and adaptable to only jinchuuriki. Not a success Minato was excited by, but it was an advancement for jinchuuriki so he felt he should take what he could get.

On the upside, Tsunade had been absolutely elated by his success. On the downside, she badgered him into taking more medical courses.

If Tsunade's return had not provided such a tremendous boost to the personnel enrolled in the medical programs, Minato was rather unsure of how the hospital would have coped with shinobi

patients *and* kept up with the burden a steadily rising civilian population placed on the hospital. Already, two enormous buildings had been constructed to keep up with Tsunade's vision of specialized care units and it was barely able to keep up with the patient load. On top of everyday visits, word of mouth spread and brought an influx of visiting patients. Foreign patients padded Konoha's coffers with requests from the desperate and wealthy, that flocked to the most renowned medic in the world for treatment.

For the last few days, fair weather and school holidays had increased the patient load from overactive children. Minato's latest was a small boy with mousy brown hair, clutching his grandmother's hands for dear life.

"Mamoru-kun, see my fingers?" Waggling the digits in the air, he felt a glimmer of satisfaction as the little chin bobbed up and down. "Excellent. You'll see my hands glow green, but I won't actually touch anything yet. But you must stay still. I'm sure you know that moving makes everything hurt more. Do you think you keep still for me?"

Another nod.

Fishing one of his many, many pre-made paper seals from his pocket, he activated it between both palms and performed the seals for the advanced diagnostic jutsu Shizune had painstakingly taught to him.

"What's the paper for?" The boy's curiosity drew him forward where he was staring with wide fascinated eyes at Minato's glowing hands.

"Well," Minato grinned. "You know how ninja can do special abilities?"

"Yeah, your powers."

"Right," Minato agreed, trying to simplify his explanation for the child's benefit. "Everyone has a different amount of energy to use our abilities. Some have a little, some have a lot. I have too much to heal you normally. Without this paper, I wouldn't be able to do it at all."

"Really?" The boy sat up, barely wincing as he frowned at the paper. "Paper can do things like that?"

Over the boy's shoulder, he shared a grin with the grandmother who looked flustered and teary-eyed.

"Only special paper, Mamoru-kun. Now, can you hold still for me?"

"Yeah…I can do it!"

"I knew you could," Minato praised gently. "Now hold still."

Minato carefully ran a glowing green palm over the join of the ligaments, bone, and muscle of the knee that was black and blue, and slightly crooked. No tears in the sinews that would require a more skilled medic, just a standard dislocation.

"I'm going to have to realign your knee before I can pop it back into place," Minato explained, reaching out to ruffle the scroungy mop of brown hair. "I know it sounds scary, but it will make everything feel much better. After I do that, I'll ease the swelling a bit. But this is an easy fix."

"So quickly?!" The older woman jerked slightly, looking almost embarrassed by her own question.

"At his age, I foresee no issues. He'll be back on the playground as early as tomorrow."

"It hurts a lot now," the boy remarked dubiously. "And it will…just feel all better? Will fixing it hurt?"

"Only a little, and much less than what you're feeling now," Minato responded truthfully, knowing that dishonesty now would not be something the child would forget later. "Do you think you can be brave for me?"

The determined expression was one Minato was all too familiar with. The boy had more courage than most children his age.

"I can do it."

"I know you can," Minato said. "Alright, let's get this done for you, kiddo."

Ten minutes later, the boy was walking a bit gingerly, but otherwise seemed content with the lollipop he had received for good

behavior. Minato had waved off the tearful thanks from the frazzled grandmother before stepping behind the nurse's station and offering the completed file to the waiting nurse.

"Hey! Minato-kun!"

Turning at the sound of his name, Minato saw Sakura waving at him from down the hall. Following Sakura, nose in a file, was Shizune with a rather pinched facial expression.

"Good afternoon, Sakura-san," Minato offered kindly, stepping out of the way of a pair of volunteers moving an occupied gurney.

"You're here today?" Sakura looked around hopefully. "Are any of our friends working this afternoon?"

After passing their first aid course, academy students were required to "volunteer" a certain number of hours at the hospital. Students studying beyond the basics could sign up for additional training under a medic, as Sakura often did.

"I am, but I just finished my last patient," Minato shrugged. "And I haven't seen anyone except Kiba earlier and he was only in because he broke his nose while working on a new technique."

"Ugh, that's the second time this month!" Sakura shook her head vigorously. "What is that moron thinking?!"

Probably isn't thinking, sadly.

Uncomfortable with the way Shizune had turned her attention to the triage list on the wall, Minato started edging his way toward his nearest exit.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I've gotta meet my Nii-san in a few minutes," Minato whispered, quickly pressing his finger to his lips and making shushing sounds as he mouthed. "See you at the Academy."

Minato walked *briskly* in the opposite direction.

"Minato?" Shizune's voice perked up hopefully.

A quick kawarimi with a garbage-can got him around a corner.

“SHIZUNE!”

Oh, hell. Tsunade was having one of her days!

Minato gave up any efforts at subterfuge and bolted through the nearest open door.

Channeling Kakashi, Minato offered a jaunty wave to a young man having his blood pressure taken by a timid looking medic.

“Pardon the intrusion!” He called as he darted past another unoccupied bed before fleeing through an open window. With mortal peril haunting his steps, Minato raced up the wall of the small-injury clinic before racing toward the controlled chaos of Kakashi’s personal chakra signature.

Lounging against the rooftiles, Kakashi was reading and lazily stroking Pakkun’s side. The pair were so perfectly content that Minato hated to disturb that easy serenity.

Not that it mattered. With their keen senses, the duo were completely aware of Minato’s presence already.

“Hey, Nii-san. I can’t believe you’re on time!” Minato uttered with bemusement colouring his tone. “And hello to you too, Pakkun!”

Kakashi waggled his visible eyebrow and saluted cheerily.

“So harsh! Next you’ll suggest that I didn’t miss you.”

Acting his age, Minato wrapped himself around his brother like an octopus. Inhaling a heady whiff of Kakashi’s musky scent, he sighed contently and melted against Kakashi’s warm back.

“Oh, Minato-pup,” Pakkun greeted with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. “It’s been a while.”

“Nii-san’s fault.” Minato squeezed Kakashi’s shoulders and peered down at the pup. “How have you and the pack been?”

“Not too bad, Minato. Bull’s mate had a litter recently so the boys and I have been getting to know the new pups,” the pug remarked, before snapping around to glower at Kakashi. “This lout still owes us some treats though. Did a tracking gig that someone forgot about.”

"Maa, I'll take care of it tomorrow," Kakashi promised easily. "I promise."

"You'd better," Pakkun barked. "And call us to roughhouse with the pup sometime, Kakashi."

Pakkun vanished with a puff of smoke.

"Is everything alright?" Minato puzzled out curiously. "That seemed odd."

With a light hum and a casual attitude that suggested that he definitely was ignoring the question, Kakashi stood and hoisted him up for a piggyback ride.

"I think I'm getting a little big for this," Minato flushed slightly from embarrassment.

"Hmm, you're pretty short," Kakashi pointed out casually.

"I'm a perfectly average height for my age," Minato spluttered, before poking a finger into Kakashi's gravity defying hair. "And you're just ludicrously tall!"

"Hmm, you must really be worried about your height to know all that, pup," Kakashi chimed cheerily. "Don't worry, you'll grow up eventually."

"I work in the hospital! I have to know statistics!" Minato protested as Kakashi raced over the rooftops, but he feared his efforts were in vain since Kakashi was cackling like a madman.

Kami dammit! I have Hatake AND Senju blood! I am NOT short!

Just because he can't hear you, doesn't mean I want to hear you squeal like a little girl.

Minato bit his tongue and groaned. How come no one ever took his side?

Sorry Kurama.

As if I care.

Arriving home, Kakashi leapt from the rooftop with the grace of a cat and dropped down into the grass. A pair of squirrels

startled and skittered away, while a few birds screeched.

"Alright, you said you had something in mind, pup?"

Fifteen minutes later found Minato hunched over Kakashi, an ink brush in hand, and piles of his research notes scattered around them. Minato adjusted a line with painstaking care, glancing periodically at the exposed Sharingan; Kakashi flipped the page of Icha Icha Combo and occasionally giggled lecherously.

The inked paper in his hands represented countless months of painstaking research. This now was the fruit of his efforts.

With trembling fingers, he settled the sealing paper over Kakashi's forehead.

"Here goes nothing," Minato muttered. "Fuin!"

Minato chewed his lip as the prototype seal activated with a brief flare of chakra.

"Well?" Minato dared to ask.

"Feels the same," Kakashi commented dryly, turning the pages as if he could care less about the success of this particular venture.

"No difference at all?"

How could that be possible?

"Nope," Kakashi needlessly confirmed, turning a page.

"That can't be," Minato muttered uselessly as he stared at the lines of sealing ink.

Where had he gone wrong? Minato had spent a truly horrifying amount of time with Kurama trying to perfect that stupid thing after the last attempt. How could it not work?!

Hurriedly activating one of his conversion seals, forced himself to calm and focus on the task at hand. Minato guided his chakra carefully into Kakashi's body and into the visual cortex of the active Sharingan. Kakashi's body reacted to the stimulation, but no more than the body would process a slight rush of sugar.

"Oh, come on," Minato growled. "It's bijuu chakra! That

should make SOME difference."

"Pup, your hackles are up," Kakashi remarked blandly.

"Not now, Nii-san!"

Attacking his stack of notes, he felt increasingly despondent at the lack of potential indicators for the cause of his failure. Minato was a sealing master—unofficial for the time being—but that was hardly relevant! He was technically a trainee medical shinobi with crappier than advisable chakra control. And goddammit, there was definitely cause to argue overconfidence, but it was absolutely infuriating that a solution to the Sharingan chakra drain was a greater obstacle than reverse engineering the Hiraishin.

Alright. Accepting that this was another failure, what had gone wrong? What had gone right?

The seal technically worked without negatively impacting Kakashi's internal homeostasis; that, if nothing else, was a huge weight off his shoulders. That indicated that the damaging properties of Kurama's chakra were purified, introducing a minute quantity of bijuu chakra into the cells safely.

Nothing had gone wrong, but the regenerative qualities of the chakra appeared to be dormant instead of boosting Kakashi's system.

What had gone wrong?

"Do you want to tell me why you look like you want me to spontaneously combust?"

"I'm sorry, Kakashi," Minato apologized half-heartedly, still unable to decipher where his misstep had been. "Nothing went wrong, but it didn't work either. I was sure it would this time too."

"Hmm, you know, my jounin-sensei was a sealing master."

Minato grunted.

No shit? Tell me something I don't know.

"What you're trying to accomplish is beyond what little I managed to learn," Kakashi tugged his hitai-ate down and vanished his book to places unspoken. "I think Minato-sensei was a little

disappointed when none of his students demonstrated aptitude for his specialization."

It wasn't true. Or was it? Minato never wanted his students to be different, but he had wanted to be part of their growth. Maybe he would have enjoyed sharing his love of fuinjutsu, but he more than most understood the art wasn't for everyone.

"You remind me of my Sensei sometimes. And not just because you share his name."

Minato fumbled with his notes. The topic of the Yondaime Hokage was one Minato went out of his way to avoid. Being compared to *himself* was problematic and could lead to questions Minato would not answer.

But—

Kakashi had deliberately lowered his guard and demonstrated remarkable vulnerability. Minato couldn't turn away from the trust his brother was offering.

Minato tossed his notes to the side, turned, and surrendered his focus to Kakashi's intent gaze.

"You think I could be like him someday?"

"You already are."

Minato wanted to turn away from the intensity shining in that lone grey eye. It felt too much, as if the weight of Kakashi's happiness and spirit was irrevocably bound in that moment. There was no escaping that hypnotic stare, only a sense of peace.

"My sensei had many qualities that you share," Kakashi spoke reverently. "But the trait I recognize the most is your resolve. I have never known a person to be more driven, more devoted a single purpose than my Sensei. You're aware of the technique that was his specialization? Of course, you, do. You probably would know better than I would."

"Hiraishin," Minato felt a half-smile tug at his lips.

Hiraishin," Kakashi echoed, tri-pronged kunai appearing in his hands.

“That’s—” Minato breathed.

“A graduation gift,” Kakashi whispered fondly. “For making jounin.”

“You kept it with you,” Minato remarked quietly, feeling mixed emotions flutter in his system.

“Always,” Kakashi slid the piece away and coughed. “Anyway, that sidetracked me. Now let’s see…ah, the Hiraishin. Do you know why the Yondaime recreated the Hiraishin?”

“The war effort,” Minato responded instantly.

“Yes, but more specifically, to end the war,” Kakashi intoned quietly. “The short version is that Konoha was on the verge of losing the Third Shinobi War. If Minato-sensei hadn’t mastered the Hiraishin, there may not have been a Konoha left to defend.

“I see that same wild-eyed determination to protect the people you care about. You’re so much like him, Minato.”

I never wanted you to notice.

“Even for a genius, mastering skills, creating jutsu, and developing new seals takes time. It may take you longer than you want, but you have the sort of resolve that surpasses even *my* Sensei, Minato. I’ve witnessed it. When you set your mind to a task, you don’t just accomplish a goal: you conquer them. You’re not going to lose to anyone, pup. Especially not to ink and paper.”

Such faith elated and dismayed Minato with equal measure. For this moment at least, Minato would pretend not to notice the dangerous way his brother’s mental health revolved around his wellbeing. Today, he would allow himself this moment to be happy.

“You have a lot of faith in me, I suppose I better not let you down,” Minato tested the waters carefully. “I don’t want to give you false hope, Kakashi.”

“You *will* succeed,” Kakashi snaked his arm back to cup Minato’s head. “I never doubt my favorite comrade.”

“Enough faith to give me some tips on raiton training?” Minato said, only half-jokingly.

“Mah, you’re still working on suiton,” Kakashi rolled to his feet. “Book store?”

Whatever it was about training together with jutsu, Kakashi avoided it like the plague.

Kurama, I could really use some actual assistance with raiton. I understand the theory, but training with an experienced, willing Sensei would be a boon to my personal efforts. Do you know anything that might be useful?

Less than you already know. Lightning really isn’t my style nor was it favored by previous jinchuuriki. Sorry, Minato.

It was a longshot, but I felt it was worth asking.

“Alright, we can go to the bookstore.” Minato raced after his taller sibling. “This better not be an excuse to get another copy of Icha Icha whatever book you’re after.”

“Nope!” Kakashi’s eye danced madly. “Shisui’s new book was supposed to hit the shelves today.”

Seriously?

“Ugh.”

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Even with elevated standards, the Academy graduation exams presented little challenge for a time traveller.

After putting the finishing touches on his essay, annotating various strategies for defusing a hypothetical territory dispute between Konoha and Kusa, Minato placed it on Inuzuka-Sensei’s desk and dismissed himself from the testing room.

Rather than test students in classes, they were each assigned a testing schedule that gave them a room and a time allotment. With this system, Minato could take an encryption exam, while Naruto tested shinobi guidelines, or Sasuke took an accuracy test. In order to prevent cheating, each group had a unique exam for each testing group. It was a clever idea that eliminated competitive tension and allowed students to focus on individual assessments.
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Rounding the corner, he spotted Ino walking with a singed Shikamaru. Minato imagined there was a story there, but dragging it out of his friend would be far too troublesome a task.

Visually, Shikamaru had changed very little over the years; the Nara perpetually slouched, dressed in dark, comfortable clothing, and napped during classes.

However, whenever a new skill was introduced in class, Shikamaru learned. If it was a jutsu, the nonchalant Nara would appear to sleep through the lesson, but presented impeccable results when asked to demonstrate their progress in the following days. If it was a trap, Minato spied Shikamaru observing the process with a single, sleepy eye, only to replicate the device perfectly later.

Shikamaru *must* practice his skills, but when? The elusive behavior was a puzzle for another day.

Much like her father, Ino was brash, haughty, and driven to prove herself. The blonde bombshell wore a navy-blue dress with her long hair coiled in a bun. Tucked into the elegant bun, a deceptively innocent blue flower bobbed: aconitum blossoms were as lethal as they were beautiful, just like Ino herself.

“Hey Minato-kun! We just got out of an encryption exam! Have you taken yours yet?”

“Geez, you’re giving me a headache just listening to you,” Shikamaru yawned.

“Quit your moaning, Shika!” Ino lugged the lazy boy forward. “Why are you being so difficult?!”

“Trees?” Minato cited their general outside of class hangout area.

“Yeah, might as well,” Ino altered course without missing a beat. “Better than sticking around here.”

On the way over, a traumatized Naruto joined them, blue eyes looking unnaturally bright as he wailed over a certainty of failure on his math exam.

A large camphor tree on the Academy grounds shaded a generous area with its girth and sprawling limbs. Sai was drawing silently while Kiba and Sakura were squabbling next to him.

"Wow, I'm surprised so many of us are out here," Minato murmured, while squinting as the sun shone directly in their eyes.

"Meh, I'm just glad I don't have to do homework anymore," Shikamaru grunted as he threw himself under the shady portion of the tree, eyes already closed. "Tou-san and Kaa-san said they really raised the standards since they were in the Academy…no wonder it was such a drag."

"Oh man, my brain is gonna leak out my ears!" Naruto clutched his head and rocked back and forth. "No more tests! I can't take it!"

Towering over the majority of their agemates, Naruto looked like a blond clone of Jiraiya with a stocky build, spiky ponytail, and dramatic tendencies. Living with the Uchiha had kept Naruto's clothing devoid of fashion disasters; aside from a thin vertical orange stripe along the seam of his shorts, Naruto was dressed from head to toe in black with an Uzumaki spiral splashed proudly on his back.

"Quit griping Naruto," Shikamaru complained from his spot on the ground. "It's not like we'll ever have to do these stupid tests ever again."

"Dude, he's totally in the right! That last test was brutal!" Kiba whirled with a slightly tormented look that Akamaru whined with piteous sympathy. "All those numbers…argh!"

"If you weren't goofing off, writing notes to your friends, you would have been fine!" Sakura, the intellectual defender, shook Kiba by his heavy grey jacket. "Most of us aren't acting like this! It's called understanding the material!"

"We don't goof off that much…" Naruto moaned unhappily. "Kaa-san assigns terrible detentions when she's in a bad mood so I've been working extra hard to stay on her good side this term."

"Yeah, I see what you're saying there Naruto. Tough luck." Naruto perked up as Ino, much to everyone's surprise, supported the prankster. "My parents have been real pains lately too. They do the psych reports for the Academy and I have to listen to them nitpick every little thing I do! *'Ino, beating up people isn't a way to solve your problems! Ino, if you keep calling your friends names it might damage your friendships!'* Like they expect me to be perfect all the time! I know none of them were half as talented as we are at our age!"

“I’m sorry about that, Ino-san,” Sai offered from where he was sketching quietly. “Perhaps you should point out their deficiencies the next time they say something to you. I’ve read that doing so often provokes intriguing results.”

` Minato jerked slightly, unsettled by the fact that Sai somehow continued to mask his chakra far too well. Definitely an indicator that he had become a bit overdependent on his sensory abilities. He would have to step up his training a bit…

That musing was disrupted by Sasuke arriving looking pristine in the expected high-collared Uchiha attire. Chouji trudged a short distance behind, munching on a stick of jerky in-between mouthfuls of potato chips.

“Sasuke! How’d it go?”

“Accuracy exams are a joke,” Sasuke muttered, dropping down in the open spot at Minato’s side. “I’m glad we’re moving into teams. The Academy is a waste of time for us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Kiba griped.

“I learned a lot,” Ino interjected. “But I’m ready to progress under focused teaching.”

Since you have time now, maybe you should have that talk with Naruto.

Turning his attention away from the ongoing conversations, Minato focused on Kurama’s suggestion. It wasn’t the worst idea. Minato had been putting off the inevitable conversation with a multitude of excuses. Bypassing them, he just felt uncomfortable broaching the topic with Naruto.

Nevertheless, it was necessary.

Not yet.

Putting off the inevitable may prevent Naruto from becoming strong. He needs to do this. You know this even if you don’t like it. I agreed that we should give Naruto time to mature and grow until he could physically cope with the chakra exposure, but we’re beyond that now. After you graduate, your control of day to day life becomes much smaller and certainly more difficult.

I just wish…

Wishes are for people that have a choice. We don't. Not unless you want Naruto to be unprepared for the dangers awaiting him.

The difficulty with having a bijuu inside your mind was a lack of privacy and an inability to lie to oneself. The voice in your head would never allow that.

It really is impossible to argue with you. I wonder why I bother trying anymore.

Oh, so you are capable of higher learning after all. I'd had my doubts.

Kurama! I was trying to be nice!

Tch. You're dragging your feet. Get a move on.

Fine, fine. Look, going right now.

"Naruto," Minato stood, coming back to himself and noticing the attention from all quarters. "Err…come with me real quick."

"Eh?" Naruto cocked his head, still looking semi-distracted by the conversations that haltingly resumed.

"I thought I'd give you some last minute pointers for your tactics test," Minato said, glancing askance to avoid Sasuke's shrewd gaze. "As long as you don't mind me helping you out a bit."

"Huh?" Naruto looked confused momentarily before breaking into a face-splitting smile. "Okay! I'm coming Minato-chan!"

Ugh. Oh, Naruto.

It's days like this that I really like that kid.

Thanks a lot, furball.

Oh, you're welcome. I live for your humiliation. It brightens my day like nothing else.

What happened to normal methods of expressing sentiment?!

Boring.

"Don't take too long!" Ino shouted after them. "You haven't had lunch and I doubt you'll get much of a chance unless your test schedule is way different than mine!"

Before they made it more than a handful of paces away, Sasuke fell into step with them. Rather than perturbed by the addition, Minato relaxed marginally. Bringing Sasuke into the loop could only benefit Naruto. Not only would Sasuke provide emotional support, there was no one more protective and loyal to their family than an Uchiha.

Stopping at a group of stumps, Minato gestured and the three of them sat.

Kurama?

We're good.

Thanks.

"Alright, what did you *actually* want to discuss?" Sasuke asked, sitting down and fiddling with the leather tassel on his bracer.

Demonstrating remarkable insight, Naruto transitioned from rocking back and forth on his heels to studying Minato like he was piecing together a puzzle.

"What's going on?" Naruto said quietly, tossing a tense glance over his shoulder, to where their friends were still loosely clumped.

"I want to discuss something with you, Naruto," Minato hesitated, but deliberately pressed a hand to his abdomen. The colour drained out of Naruto's face and Sasuke's features could have been made from carved stone.

"What about it?" Naruto bit our harshly, looking at his hands, away, and curling his fingers into fists.

Not a good sign. Resistance was expected, but the overt hostility was unexpected. Kurama was obviously correct, he should never have put off this conversation.

"Do you remember what we talked about all those years

ago? When we discussed what we are?" Minato ventured carefully, rather wary of the atypical frosty glint in Naruto's sapphire eyes. "I told you back then how jinchuuriki are essentially living prisons for their tenants."

"I remember," Naruto grunted. "What of it?"

Minato watched Naruto rip out a handful of grass, drop it, and reach for another clump of greenery.

"None of us care," Sasuke interjected with a low snort, that snapped Naruto out of his brooding glower. "Bijuu or not, you're just Naruto. If you ever thought our friends would turn their backs on you, you're a bigger moron than I thought."

"Don't you think I know that?! My family is the best! Our friends, the ones that know, no one cares. They don't even bring it up and they still treat me the same!" Naruto jumped up and kicked a rock. "This isn't about you guys!"

Minato's eyes shuttered for a moment.

I'm not sorry, Naruto. I don't have that luxury. But—

"Then what?" Sasuke grunted. "Is this about the villagers?"

I'm sorry I placed so much faith in people.

"I can't stand it," Naruto flopped down like a dead fish. "No matter how nice my clothes are, how good my grades, or no matter how hard I work, nothing changes. I don't go shopping with Kaa-san because I don't want them to overcharge her or sell bad food. I try to use the rooftops, because when I don't, people are always giving me dirty looks and whispering. Even Hiashi thinks they're a bunch of prejudiced fools!"

"If the villagers are idiots, why do you care what they think?"

Minato lifted a brow, but nodded gratefully in thanks. His friend's lips quirked slightly, before his attention reverted to Naruto.

"I—I don't!" Naruto's hair quivered like an agitated porcupine, before the blond slumped forward miserably. "I just get tired of it sometimes. I don't like how they all look at me, like they're waiting for me to prove that I really am just a stupid demon. I just

wish I didn't have to put up this crap all the time. I wish I was normal, like everyone else."

The conversational rebuttals Minato could attempt were numerous, but only one of them was ham-fisted enough to defuse an Uzumaki.

"I never took you for a coward, Naruto," Minato stated quietly.

Both of his friends stilled like statues; a moment passed and Sasuke made a garbled, choked sound, while Naruto's widened into saucers.

"You're letting people who don't even truly know you, control your life," Minato stated dispassionately. "I always imagined you would prove to Konoha who Uzumaki Naruto really is. Instead, you're allowing your fears to prevent you from realizing your dreams."

"But—"

"You're a jinchuuriki!" Minato shook off the protests and crossed his arms. "That isn't going to change. Instead of resenting it, own it. Be proud. Fear isn't going to change the hearts and minds of people that are afraid. Only you and your actions can do that."

Baby blues watered, a nose quivered, and Minato was knocked flat by a sobbing blond.

"Naruto!" Minato gasped, aghast as the blond clung to like a monkey—a giant, blond monkey. "Naruto! It's fine! Gah! Get off!"

Attempts to pry Naruto off ended in dismal failure. Several minutes of cajoling pleas and desperate glances directed to a merciless Sasuke, before his friend finally intervened and wrangled the overemotional Uzumaki.

"Naruto, we still need to talk," Minato choked out, swatting at bits of grass clinging to his shirt.

"Oh, right," Naruto grunted, slightly red in the face as he attempted to wriggle out of the headlock Sasuke had him in. "What did we need to talk about?"

"Have you talked to the Kyuubi since that day?"

Instantly, Naruto collapsed to the ground gasping and Sasuke whipped around with a perplexed frown.

“He hasn’t,” Sasuke’s eyes flicked down to Naruto who had his head cocked and a finger tapping his chin. “You want him to speak to it.”

No one gave Sasuke enough credit. Not only was he skilled in a variety of combat methods, but his friend was incredibly quick on the uptake.

“Naruto, there will come a day when you need to be able to use the Kyuubi’s chakra. You don’t want it to happen when you become angry on the battlefield, when you’re not ready for it. You need to start learning how.”

“Wouldn’t it be best to just use my own power? Why should I bother with that stupid fox’s chakra anyway?” Naruto protested, looking askance toward where their friends were gathered. “I have a lot of chakra all by myself and I’m kicking ass.”

“You make a lot of valid points,” Minato hummed thoughtfully, drawing a confused pout from the blond. “But if I have a sword and don’t know how to use it, what happens when I try to use it for the first time?”

Naruto chewed his bottom lip and frowned unhappily.

“It took me forever to get as good as I am,” Naruto admitted with a distasteful moue of his lips. “And I kept making a lot of stupid mistakes when I first started out. Mistakes that…probably would hurt me or someone around me.”

“Exactly,” Minato said. “That’s why learning to use that chakra now instead of when a mission goes sour is going to be so important.”

“You’ve interacted with the fox.”

Sasuke eyes lit up with something like awe, while Naruto spluttered.

“-you?! You met yours?!”

Cheeks flaming with embarassment, Minato grinned sheepishly.

"There is nothing lonelier than being locked away," Minato stated, allowing a bit of bitterness to seep into his words. "The Kyuubi hated me for a long time and I can understand why. I want to be his friend and work together. Like Fū-san is with her bijuu."

"Oh…Oh!" Naruto perked up. "You mean, like her flying!"

"Of course," Minato grinned. "Fū couldn't fly without getting along with the Nanabi. She might have been able to use the chakra without communicating, but nothing more than that. From what I've heard, Fū is friends with her bijuu too."

"Huh, how do I talk to the fox then?" Naruto looked somewhat reluctant but determined.

"Before I tell you, promise me you'll ask the Kyuubi to reach out for his other half, okay?" Minato said.

"Huh?"

Minato resisted the urge to ruffle Naruto's hair—albeit barely. There were times that the blond looked so adorably perplexed that Minato had the tendency to treat the other boy like an elder sibling or the forbidden "p" word.

"Since my relationship with the Kyuubi is going a little better, it might be a good idea if my Kyuubi talks to your Kyuubi," Minato said. Seeing Naruto nod, though still looking like he was a bit confused, Minato plowed onward. "And now let's discuss meditation."

"Oh, this is going to be unpleasant," Sasuke rubbed his head thoughtfully. "If it's a mind thing, I could just knock him out."

"Shut up, Sasuke!" Naruto howled. "It's just…meditation. Ugh, yuck!"

Minato clapped a hand over his mouth to prevent a snigger from escaping as Naruto's face shrivelled up like a prune.

"Naruto, I can tell that you're not very happy about giving this a shot, but thank you for doing it."

"You were my first friend, dattebayo!" Naruto smiled sheepishly. "You haven't let me down yet so…I gotta show you that I'm not going to let you down either! If this is something I have to do to get stronger, than I'm going to do it. Even if I'm not excited about

it.”

“I hate to say it, but if Naruto is determined, he’ll master it sooner or later,” Sasuke seemed determined to ignore the way the blond’s eyes lit up like stars.

Truly an Uzumaki through and through.

“Alright, now try to relax and be patient,” Minato said encouragingly, knowing how short Naruto’s attention span could be. “I don’t expect you to succeed right away, but one you learn, achieving a connection will be instantaneous.”

“Nevermind, Naruto is going to need a few years for this. He has the patience of a toddler!” Sasuke muttered from the side.

“Why you!”

Why me?

Because the Nidaime Hokage sent you back in time to save the future.

Sometimes I think you deliberately say things like that just to ruin my mood.

Yep.

You could at least deny it!

The truth is more interesting.

The mocking laughter chased him as he firmly coaxed Naruto into pose and attempted to guide him through the early stages of making contact with his bijuu. Barely into the initial explanation, Naruto’s stomach growled like a hungry bear and instigated a round of whinging complaints of hunger and ramen.

If Madara didn’t kill them all, Minato swore the insatiable Uzumaki appetite might.

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Minato tripped for the third time in under a minute as
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Shizune and Tenzo alternatively pulled, pushed, and dragged him toward the *surprise* waiting for him.

"Keep your eyes closed, Nato!" Shizune giggled in his ear.

"You're covering my eyes with one of your hands! And you've blindfolded me! Twice!" Minato tripped *again*, when his arms were pulled in opposing directions. "Guys, I'm going to have two dislocated shoulders if this keeps up!"

"Bah, everyone here can fix it," Shizune giggled to his right.

Not the point!

"Now, now, pup," Kakashi's voice called from—Minato tipped his head to his left. "If we didn't have faith in your talents, we wouldn't have to take such measures! Besides, most people only graduate from the Academy once!"

Wow. Way to subtlety drop hints for that pathetic jounin-sensei test. Next thing you know, Kakashi will be monologuing to some enemy shinobi, explaining how he defeated them before he actually defeats them.

Kurama, I don't think Kakashi is foolish enough to do something like that. Jiraiya would do that, sure, but, Kakashi isn't that overconfident.

Willing to put your naming rights where your mouth is?

You already have the naming rights to my next jutsu! And—ouch!!! My toes!

"Someone totally just broke one of my toes!"

"Err—"

"What is taking you so long?" Tsunade barked, causing the trio to knock into Minato from all sides ending with an elbow to the gut and a rattled spine. "What the hell are you doing to him?"

Oh, thank Kami. It was a rare day that Tsunade was the voice of reason, but he cherished his savior chastising the trio herding him forward.

"We're bringing him for the surprise…" Tenzo replied, sounding uncertain and uncomfortable.

“Oh, shut up.”

Tsunade’s chakra flickered, a trail of footsteps, and Tsunade’s crisp fingernails slid beneath the double-layered blindfold.

“Ready, Minato?”

Not even marginally, but Tsunade’s presence had done a lot to soothe Minato’s rattled nerves.

“As I’ll ever be.”

The cloth was yanked free with a solid tug: Minato exhaled sharply at the mountain of parcels in front of him. Boggled, Minato’s jaw worked soundlessly for a second. The click and flash jerked him out of his stupor.

“So cute!” Shizune cooed from behind the camera lens. “Say cheese!”

“Hey!” Minato protested. “What *is* all this?”

Sidling over him, book notably absent, Kakashi slung an arm around Minato’s shoulders.

“These are gifts to start your shinobi career,” Kakashi explained, voice devoid of his typical humor as he pointed to the parcels.

“Have to make sure you have everything you need,” Tsunade snorted, but looked rather fond and there was a distinctive shine around Tsunade’s eyes that was not part of the genjutsu that cloaked her appearance.

A lump tightened in his throat and Minato knew his eyes were watering slightly. Graduation was a significantly different experience when you had adults in your life that loved you. It made him ache at the thought of kids that had no one to share their accomplishments with.

Minato had known that hurt once. Naruto probably had in another life, but would never know it now.

“Thank you,” Minato said, letting a pair of tears fall before smiling. “I’m not trying to ruin the moment, but I’m just...really happy. I don’t want to take anyone for granted. I love you all.”

“Oh, Minato.” Shizune buried her face in Tenzo’s chest. Said ANBU face went scarlet, his arms wrapped around Shizune’s waist, and tenderly rubbed the woman’s back.

“Damn, kid,” Tsunade dropped into her chair with a grunt. “Making me all emotional.”

Minato tugged Kakashi down beside him, knowing that closeness would be the cure for Kakashi’s ailment.

“You have quite a pile there,” Kakashi aptly demonstrated his propensity for stating the obvious.

“I suppose so.”

Snagging a parcel, Minato grinned and waved as the camera flash went off again.

From Gai, a green leotard that vanished abruptly—Kakashi’s command of Katon jutsu apparently approached Uchiha levels—and a surprisingly thoughtful waterproof scroll-case.

Before Minato could finish opening Jiraiya’s gift, Tsunade ripped her teammate’s complete literary works out of his arms and demonstrated that books were no match for brute strength. After Kakashi’s horrified exclamations petered out, Jiraiya’s other gift of an expensive set of quality shuriken and kunai were begrudgingly approved. The sentiment wasn’t the same, but Minato felt a surge of pleasure that Jiraiya had sent him anything at all.

From Tenzo, a serviceable, black equipment pouch. Opting to continue the practical trend, a medical kit that Shizune had personally assembled with enough supplies to perform an emergency field surgery that Minato certainly *wasn’t* qualified to perform.

There were limits even for prodigies!

From family friends; protective clothing for different climates, fuinjutsu supplies, and field equipment for extended stays outside the village.

From citizens of Konoha; ridiculously expensive kimonos that he would never, ever wear. Useless trinkets that he set aside to pass out to the girls and an assortment of baked goods that Minato figured would be appreciated by the local orphanage.

From the Sandaime, Minato tugged a note free and read the neat script.

Minato, I'm sorry that it took me so long to put this together for you. The majority of the Senju Clan's records went missing, but as a student of the Nidaime, I had in my possession a few items that I felt should be turned over to you now. If you desire, I would be more than willing to share my recollections of your parents.

-Sarutobi Hiruzen

"That from Sensei? What is it?"

Shrugging, Minato lifted the lid and gasped softly. A pile of photographs sat atop a wrapped parcel. The first was a picture of Senju Tobirama in the Hokage robes with six grinning teenagers standing around his stone-faced father.

"Nidaime-sama!" Tenzo gasped, clearly in the throes of hero-worship.

"I don't think I've seen that one," Tsunade moved so she was sitting next to him. "I guess that old bitty Koharu was young once, after all."

Minato listened in turn as Tsunade identified each person and committed the faces to memory.

"Aa," Kakashi observed the photo curiously. "Pup got lucky that his Hatake genes prevented a genetic windfall. Looking constipated all the time can't have been good for the Nidaime's mental state."

"Sempai!" An utterly scandalized Tenzo pointed an offended figure at Kakashi's back. "The Nidaime is one of the most powerful shinobi to ever live. And Minato-kun is his son! How could you say such blasphemy?!"

Shizune giggled, but Tsunade snorted and pointed at the picture.

"Kakashi's right. Oji-san really did have a stick up his ass."

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune wailed, eyes aflame. "You shouldn't say such things about Minato's parents!"

"Minato's a genin. If he can't handle a little bit of swearing by this point, he'll never make it past his first mission." Tsunade tapped her foot dangerously and the floor creaked ominously, Minato almost feeling sorry for Tenzo who was staring at the cracked floorboards with tears in his eyes. "Now keep looking at your presents! We have a party to get to in a while."

Nodding, Minato looked through the meager pile of photographs. Most featured the Nidaime and his team. One was a candid shot of Tobirama with Hashirama's arm slung around his shoulders, and an image of a woman with gorgeous red hair that Kurama's unhappy rumblings identified as Uzumaki Mito.

With only two photographs remaining, Minato paused at an unfamiliar team photo with Uchiha Kagami standing behind three youngsters. One of them with noticeable silver spikes in a ponytail with a lopsided grin.

"Tou-san," Kakashi breathed the word like a prayer, a finger reaching out to hover over the smiling visage. "I've never seen my father's team picture…never even knew who his Sensei was."

"I knew," Tsunade admitted quietly. "I just never thought about it much. Kagami died shortly after Sakumo made Chunin. And the teammates never had a chance to make a lasting impression."

The implied death sentence of the nameless shinobi hung in the air.

I'll have to frame this one and put it up. I think Kakashi needs it more than I do.

The final image was of an older Sakumo, closer to the man Minato remembered, sitting with Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Orochimaru. Each of them with a sake cup in hand, saluted the photographer.

Sakumo, who were you? What kind of man were you before the village betrayed you? Kakashi needed you, for that, I used to resent you. Maybe it's unfair to judge you…after all, I never knew you and I never walked your path.

"Let's see what else you have from my old sensei!" Tsunade lifted the photographs from his hands gently setting them aside.

"Right," Minato caught himself from reaching back for the pictures.

For no discernible reason, he felt oddly bereft at their loss.

Forcing himself to focus on the last parcel from the Sandaime, he tugged at the ribbon mechanically. Pulling away the last bit of wrap, Minato's eyes lit up at the sight of a chokuto. The hilt had a vine pattern carved along the shaft, while a light touch proved the blade to be made of chakra conducting steel. Along the leather sheath, a note was attached.

This blade was one that Tobirama kept among his personal possessions. It originally belonged to Hashirama-sama. Rather than rotting in my personal collection, I'm sure both your ancestors would prefer it passed to you—back into active service.

"I don't remember this," Tsunade looked at the blade with an appreciative look. "Of course, he passed away when I was very young, so that isn't so surprising. I'm happy Sensei returned it to our family though. That will definitely be a benefit to your career."

"You don't mind?" Minato's fingers traced the hilt, startled as he felt an external chakra source, emanating from the blade itself. The aura was faint, but felt peculiarly sentient as the foreign chakra greeted him with something not unlike a welcome. As quickly as it came, the chakra retreated into a state akin to hibernation.

What was that?

That, was Senju Hashirama's chakra. Be careful with that, Minato. A blade imbued with the lifeforce of that man is an artifact many would kill for.

Why would the Hokage give it to me?

If I'm honest, that chakra is likely responding to the Senju part of you…or my chakra. I doubt the old man knew.

Wait? Is this thing dangerous for you?

Don't be foolish. It's a sword: a pointy stick useful for poking holes in less competent mortals. It's unlikely to possess any properties that resemble that foolish troupe of swordsmen from Kiri.

How sure are you?

Is this really the opportune time for you to badger the both of us with your compulsive need to panic over everything you're not

sure about? As the older and WISER individual, I can tell you that damn sword probably has chakra sticking to it because Hashirama's chakra is an utter abomination that clings to everything it touches like glue.

That didn't really answer my question.

You're hopeless. You know that, right?

You do mention it rather frequently.

The blade hummed again and Minato reluctantly pulled his hands away, feeling almost as if he were pulling apart a pair of magnets, but not wanting to alarm his family members.

"Guess I'll need to brush up on my bladework," Minato admitted. "Maybe I can ask Sasuke and Naruto for some tips."

"Now that's an idea," Shizune praised fondly. "Your jounin-sensei may be able to assist you too!"

"Your summons may be of help in that area too," Tsunade suggested.

Now *that* suggestion had potential. The otters had been invaluable in augmenting Minato's skills on the sly. A more direct form of instruction would be priceless.

"I'll do that," Minato gave the sword a last, appreciative glance before turning toward one of the last packages that Kakashi was offering him.

"The one is from me," Kakashi scratched his masked cheek and slouched slightly.

A swath of fabric dumped into his lap. Shaking out the material, Minato gasped softly: a white haori with a pattern of scarlet triangles on the sleeves. It was a style unique to the White Fang. Until now, anyway.

"It's…you don't have to wear it," Kakashi said, far too easily to signify anything except discomfort.

"Kakashi," Minato poured every ounce of earnest emotion into his voice. "It's perfect." Minato stood and slipped into the short sleeved haori. Turning fully about, Minato grinned and set his hands

on his hips. “So? How do I look?”

“It suits you,” Kakashi eye-smiled, looking lost in memories, but of a positive nature rather than negative.

“Eh?” Tsunade stood, reached over, and snapped his hair elastic.

“Hey!” He cried out a protest as his long hair tumbled down his back free of constraint. “What’s that for?!”

“Hold still!” Tsunade mussed his hair with her fingers, despite his best efforts to dodge. “Ah, there we go! Now that you look like you’ve just rolled out of bed, you could pass for a Hatake!”

“Gee…thanks,” Minato smoothed his hair forlornly. “Now I have to comb it again…”

“My gift should be rather obvious,” Tsunade stated proudly as she dumped the last package in his lap.

Giving it a feel, Minato said.

“Uniform?”

“Several,” Tsunade admitted as he unwrapped the paper. “Training and mission uniforms can be very different.”

Black and navy uniforms in various lengths, styles and durability. All crafted from flexible materials and compatible with fuinjutsu. Standard, but costly.

Standing up, Minato looked from each person and made sure to catch their eyes.

“I…I just want you all to know how much I love you.”

Shizune made a soft sound.

“Pup.”

Kakashi stepped forward, but Minato retreated, halting his brother in his tracks.

“No, no!” Minato shook his head. “This isn’t going to be a sad moment or one of those crazy, sappy speeches that will have us all crying. Not today!”

The four adults exchanged glances that were both bemused and proud, but ultimately remained expectant.

"Tenzo, when you stealth-moved in with Shizune for an eternal sleepover, Tsunade promised to kill you if you screwed up!" Minato almost laughed as Tenzo's jaw crashed into the floor and Shizune had her palm smothering her own set of giggles. "I'm glad you're still among the living! Shizune's happiness is important to me and you've become an essential member of our family. Thank you!"

The man shuffled awkwardly and caught the box of tissue Tsunade threw at his head. With a plaintive sniffle, the man mumbled a watery thanks.

"Shizune, you're the family rock. Seriously, without you, we would all be screwed. From the simple things like making sure our family doesn't starve and eat out every night to bringing me extra blankets on colder nights. You're always thinking about everyone around you. You're amazing and you inspire me to be…better than I am."

Shizune broke into a blubbering fit that she was doing a poor job of stifling.

"Nii-san and Oba-san," Minato's swallowed around a lump that refused to leave his throat. "I can't classify what you two mean to me. But when I think of home, I think of you two. To be in your arms, is to be home. It's my greatest wish to defend the people I love, my home. I promised not to get too sappy, but I…

"I know everything is about to change. But I wanted to thank you all for helping me become the person I am today. Just… thank you. I love you all."

For a long moment nobody moved, no one breathed.

"That was the sappiest, speech ever!" Tsunade swept Minato into her arms, and he could hear her voice break slightly. "You just promise to come home, you little brat."

With a content sigh, he snuggled into her shoulder feeling safe, secure, and utterly content.

"Oh, Nato."

Shizune's callused fingers squeezed his own, the thumb

rubbing the back of his hand. Tenzo inched closer, hovering at his elbow.

From behind, Kakashi's comforting arm reached out to ruffle his hair and settle at the base of his neck.

They stood there as a content tangle of bodies for a time. It was a rare pleasure to just soak in the vivid presence of people you love. It was a gift Minato was not about to undervalue.

"Not to rush anyone, but if we want to make it reasonably on-time, perhaps we should get going soon?" Tenzo prompted cautiously. Apparently, a few hits from Tsunade really did teach someone new tricks.

"Oh! My appetizers!" Shizune squealed, kawarimi'd with a wooden spoon, and disappeared into the kitchen. "Where's my spatula?!"

Tenzo shunshined after his distraught lover.

"Zune-chan, you have it in your hand!"

"Those two," Tsunade muttered with a soft sigh. "When is that man ever going to propose?"

"What makes you think he hasn't?"

"Hmm?" Kakashi perked up behind him.

"They're engaged?" Tsunade chewed on the words distastefully. "They better not be without saying something…"

"No, no," Minato wriggled slightly, until Tsunade took the hint and set him down. "Fū-chan told Naruto that he asked Shizune, but she turned him down."

"Oh?" Kakashi leaned in, eye glittering with eager delight. Tsunade looked undecided between elation and dismay, but seemed to settle for interest.

"This is *only* what I heard," Minato fed the gossip monsters carefully. "But, Shizune told him she would only propose to *him* if he survived living with our family for a few years. Word around the clans is that we're a handful."

"It must be the end of the world if the gossipmongers aren't

completely wrong about something," Tsunade mused, not sounding in the least offended. "In any event, I have some new ammunition the next time you're out for a sleepover, Minato."

"You're going gambling again?" Minato groaned as he remembered the last time he'd been dragged to a gambling den to watch the Legendary Sucker get conned by some of the most obvious ploys in the world. "You *know* how your luck is Oba-san! And your instincts at the card table are more likely to start a war than end in victory!"

"Bah! You're too young to know anything about adult activities like gambling, Mina-chan! Go get your sandals on! We're out of here!"

Tsunade swatted him on the back before briskly making her way into the kitchen to herd the frantic duo outdoors.

"Should we…intervene?" Minato jumped as a dish met a smashing end. "Or maybe we could head over and they could catch up?"

"You're learning!" Kakashi smiled proudly.

Minato and Kakashi made a break for it.

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If someone looked into the classroom, they would have imagined at least half of the class was awaiting execution rather than simple team assignments. As it was, there was a low hum of conversation interspersed with occasional hysterical outbursts, hushed whispering, and darting glances.

Minato ignored the appreciative looks directed his way from graduates that were not part of his circle-of-friends as he took a free seat between Sasuke and Sai. The latter greeted him with a polite nod, which Minato returned, while Sasuke uncharacteristically said nothing, merely shifted in his seat.

"Ah, shit," Kiba's voice came out slightly muffled from
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where his face was buried in Akamaru's fur. "I'm gonna get paired up with a couple of civvies, I just know it! I helped Naruto prank Iruka-Sensei too many times! There gonna put me with those losers, I just know it!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!" Sakura turned on Kiba, the Inuzuka flailing backward and deposing Shikamaru from his chair. Said Nara merely grumbled and curled up for naptime on the floor, while Kiba skittered backward to escape an enraged Sakura.

"I-I, just…" Kiba looked around helplessly for aid. "Guys? Help me out here!"

"Exercise that brain of yours, mutt." Sasuke grinned mockingly.

"Gonna have to agree, Inuzuka!" Ino winked and flashed her teeth ferally. "You totally brought this on yourself."

"Kiba-kun, you need to learn to think before speaking," Sai chimed in with a peculiar look that made the pale boy appear as if he were lost in a fog. "It took a lot of effort to achieve friendships with everyone, but it has been much easier since I stopped saying everything I thought out loud."

Sai didn't naturally ease into their circle of friends like Sakura. It took a lot of effort, surviving multiple prankings, and more than one intercession from Minato and Sasuke of all people. Slowly but surely, Sai had inched his way into friendships; somehow becoming a regular sparring partner for Chouji, painting Shikamaru's ceiling with a realistic sky, and creating origami with Ino and Hinata. Eccentric took effort, but eventually Sai fell into their group as if he had been there all along.

"What exactly is your problem, Kiba?!" Sakura looked seconds from pummeling the nervous boy. "I'm one of the top students here. And yeah, my stamina isn't as great as yours, but I could run circles around you, moron!"

"Bullshit! The Academy isn't a joke anymore, but you're still from a civilian family, Haruno! Your family can't teach you anything! All of us get extra training outside the Academy! You don't! Sure, you're better than the other civvies in our class, but that isn't saying all that much."

Years of time together, still, Minato failed to compelling

argue that clan children didn't make better shinobi. Honestly, they typically did. It was a rare day that a clanless nobody had the chakra pool, the skill, and the determination to tangle with shinobi that were literally bred to be powerhouses.

Not to say civilians wouldn't become shinobi, statistics merely reflected the truth of an unfair system. Statistics also contributed to present attitudes. Superiority complexes were alive and kicking; unfortunately for Kiba, he often stuck his foot in his mouth.

"Knock it off!"

Crack!

Sasuke slammed his hands down on the desk.

"We've graduated. We're genin now. Start acting like it. Kiba, show some respect for your comrades. Sakura, just smash his nose in next time."

"Will do, Sasuke-kun!" Sakura chirped, churlishly sticking her tongue out before stomping over to reclaim her seat beside Ino.

"Team assignments used to be predictable, but since they revamped the Academy, there isn't much that we can predict," Ino said. "At one point, I would have been certain that I would end up with Chouji and Shikamaru because of our parents, but now, I'm not sure that will actually happen."

Not a bad analysis, from his point of view, but Minato knew Naruto would be separated from himself and that an effort would be made to keep at least one kunoichi on each team. Aside from that, the team match-ups for this class should have proven intriguing. Oh, to have been a fly on that wall!

When Sasuke began fidgeting with the metal plates on the back of his new gloves, Minato decided enough was enough.

Minato shifted and nudged Sasuke gently. "Okay, Sasuke, what's wrong? I can see that you're wrestling with something in your mind. What's the matter?"

"How is it that you can always tell?" Sasuke shook his head and snorted. "You must be spying on me or something."

"I just know *you*," Minato countered factually, playfully

nudging him in the ribs. “But, Sasuke, you never answered my question.”

“I’m worried too,” Sasuke whispered softly, looking down and twiddling his thumbs tensely. “About team assignments.”

“They won’t put you with an unsuitable team,” Minato explained, attempting to put Sasuke’s mind at ease. “Considerations are given to team dynamic and personality concerns. Placing you with individuals that won’t promote teamwork is ill-advised. And don’t forget they brought in a team of psychologists to observe us. I’m sure that will have an impact on our placements too.”

“As if that’s what he’s worried about,” Shikamaru mouthed off from where he was sprawled on the floor.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Shikamaru-kun?”

The Nara rolled over and muttered something unintelligible.

You’re an idiot.

Oh, come on! What did I do this time?

As if I could be bothered to explain the obvious.

“Hey guys!”

Turning toward Naruto’s voice, Minato raised his hand in greeting, only to freeze up and feel Kurama howl in outrage.

“Naruto! What the hell are you wearing?” Ino asked the question Minato was unable to ask, due to feeling absolutely stupefied.

Yondaime, I’m going to murder your offspring.

Not my son, remember?

Naruto was dressed in overly familiar dark, red armor with black garb underneath. Instead of the spiky ponytail, Naruto had let the mess down and somehow styled it into an imitation of Uchiha Madara.

Maybe it would have been funny if Naruto hadn’t died when that lunatic Uchiha ripped his bijuu out of him. And

manipulating Obito into destroying the world.

He's dressed as him!!! HIM!!!!!!!!

It's just harmless mimicry. It doesn't mean anything!

Don't try that with me. He's dressed like that piece of trash!

And what do you want me to do?! Go tell him that Madara is still alive and has it out for him personally? Because that will go SO well!

"Naruto, you know we're just getting team assignments today," Hinata rubbed her cheek with a disappointed frown. "We're not going on any missions that require…armor. At least not for a long time."

"That's what you guys think!" Naruto grinned cheekily! "I'm ready to rescue some princesses!"

"Why are you dressed like Madara, idiot?" Sasuke asked, before frowning again. "And how did you get the money for that? You got a lot of presents, but that wasn't one of them."

"Ah! Ero-Sennin sent me a bunch of money as an early graduation present. I ordered this baby for missions! I can't wait for our first one!"

I can't wait to see you painting fences, cleaning the Inuzuka kennels, and chasing cats while wearing that get-up…

"I think he looks cool," Chouji defended cheerily, eating a piece of jerky and twirling a shuriken with his free hand.

"Why are you modelling yourself after Madara?" Sasuke sniped, face twisted into a harsh scowl.

"Hey, I was paying attention when Kaa-san was explaining clan history!" Naruto looked oddly starstruck. "Madara founded the village AND was best friends with the Shodai! Besides, my hair is long enough to look like the clan drawings of him! I look so freaking badass!"

You're gonna look like a smear on the floor!

Firmly deciding *not* going there with Kurama was the safest option, Minato sat and watched as Sasuke stood and verbally erupted.

“Moron! Madara was a traitor to Konoha and a disgrace to our Clan! He left the village, came back, and tried to destroy it! The Shodai Hokage had to kill that crazy bastard to prevent him from destroying Konoha!”

Naruto gawped like a fish out of water.

“What?! No way! You’re just jealous! And a liar!”

Before Sasuke could punch his brother’s lights out, Minato stood, only to be interrupted by a confused looking Sakura.

“Naruto, he isn’t lying. Don’t you remember that lecture on the Valley of the End? Madara fought the Shodai Hokage to the death after he went crazy.”

“WHAT?! Seriously?” Naruto was the picture of devastation. “I thought he was a good guy!”

“Yeah,” Minato rubbed the back of his neck as Kurama snarled viciously. “Madara is a bit of a sensitive topic in Konoha.”

“Ah man,” Naruto groaned. “I wanted to look like a badass Uchiha! I don’t want to look like some emo traitor!”

Minato’s head thumped to his desk, but not before Hinata dragged an unresisting Naruto away to scold him and return the blond’s hairstyle to its mirror of Jiraiya.

“Hey, Minato,” Minato felt Sasuke move closer, their elbows bumping. “Thanks.”

Maybe it said something about Minato surrounding himself with people that had prickly outer shells, but had good hearts inside.

Turning his face, he caught a rare unguarded smile from the perpetually pensive Sasuke and found himself returning the rare smile with one of his own.

“For what?”

Rather than answering, Sasuke’s eyes glittered mischieviously and he turned to face the front of the room.

“Oh crap! Here comes Iruka-Sensei!” Kiba moaned, diving behind his desk.

The door swung and their tactics teacher entered the class with a clipboard and a cheek splitting grin from ear to ear.

“Alright, good morning genin! I would like to take this opportunity to say that teaching all of you during tactical assignments was an absolute pleasure!”

“Woo! Thanks, Iruka-Sensei!” Naruto cheered.

“Alright Sensei! Your class was never boring so I always showed up to it!” Kiba whooped loudly.

There was a round of polite remarks, that Iruka seemed to take in stride, despite the dark flush on his face.

“Good luck everyone. No matter what we’ll still be friends,” Minato quickly spoke before Iruka resumed talking. “I can’t wait to hear about how your first team meeting goes.”

“Thanks Minato-kun,” Chouji looked rather emotional and uncertain. “I want to hear how all of you do too!”

“Sheesh, what a pain,” Shikamaru reappeared next to his friend. “But not hearing from all of you would be odd, so let’s get together in a few days.”

“I would like that,” Sai stated quietly.

“I’d love that,” Sakura’s insecurity was plain as day on her face.

“Count me in,” Ino added, easily followed by everyone else.

“Thank you everyone!” Iruka called out, attempting to restore order. “Listen up! I’m going to be calling out your assignments as instructors arrive.”

Minato sat up attentively. This was the moment that would define everything.

“—good luck!” Iruka waved out a group of three civilian graduates with a female jounin, before Shizune walked in, waving cheerily toward Minato before approaching Iruka.

“Ah, Shizune-sensei,” Iruka looked somewhat ruffled. “Is there—”

“I’m here to collect our apprentice, Iruka-sensei,” Shizune smiled at the frazzled chunin kindly. “Haruno-san.”

“Huh?” Sakura sat up in her chair and Minato had a sneaking suspicion he already knew what this was about.

“Haruno-san, you’ve been selected as an apprentice to Senju Tsunade,” Shizune grinned as Sakura practically leapt from her seat in excitement. “Your progress in the classroom and at the hospital has not gone unnoticed. Come with me please!”

Sakura appeared rooted in place so Minato resigned himself to poking his friend in the back.

“Sakura-san, trust me, you don’t want to be late!”

“Gah!” Sakura burst forward at rather alarming speeds until she was neatly at Shizune’s side. Reaching her goal, Sakura’s fist pumped into the air and she screeched in triumph! “I did it! Shannaro!”

Minato watched Naruto lean forward with stars in his eyes as Sakura waltzed out the door in triumph.

“Sakura-chan is soooo cool!” Naruto giggled, not noticing that Hinata looked prepared to set him on fire!

“R-right, then,” Iruka scratched his cheek. “Next, let’s see…”

A poof of smoke engulfed the front of the classroom. Having sensed the familiar chakra arriving, Minato laughed as Jiraiya appeared on the back of a tolerant looking Gama inside the classroom to appreciative oohs and ahs.

Minato was rarely blindsided, but he hadn’t expected Jiraiya to take another team. The Sannin had expressed no desire to train more students, not to mention a genin team. And with his spy network to consider, it was a bizarre move.

That could only imply something had changed. Not that it was necessarily bad. Minato knew firsthand that Naruto couldn’t ask for a better teacher, the other two students would be just as fortunate.

“Hear you have some brats looking for a Sensei, Umino-san,” Jiraiya purred, swinging his hair around and posing in what

some might consider a dramatic fashion.

"Ero-Sennin!" Naruto shouted, leaping up on his desk theatrically and pointing a finger. "What are you doing here?!"

"I told you not to call me that you brat!" Jiraiya had his fist extended and his face had reddened.

"Then stop writing those dirty books!"

"SHUT UP!" Iruka's head grew as he shouted in outrage at the arguing pair. "Team 7 under Jiraiya is Uzumaki Naruto, Hyuuga Hinata, and Akimichi Chouji."

Minato watched Chouji stand up uneasily, before trotting up to the front with Hinata to follow out the bickering Naruto and Jiraiya.

"Hinata wasn't exactly a surprise, but I didn't imagine Chouji ending up with those two," Ino admitted.

"Yeah, I didn't exactly see that coming either," Shikamaru seemed irked by that.

"Team 11 is—"

"Going to wish they'd never been born!"

A devilish chortle came from a kunoichi with purple hair, wearing a trench coat that Minato couldn't quite identify.

"Anko-san, hold on a minute—"

"Quit blathering, Umino!" The kunoichi waggled a kunai in their former sensei's face. "Mitarashi Anko: Sensei of Team 11! Welcome to your new hell! Now, Tsume's offspring, Inoichi's girl, and uh, Sai! Get your asses to training ground 13 within the next fifteen minutes…or else!"

Anko tapped her kunai to her throat, grinned wickedly, and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Kiba looked spooked, while Ino actually looked intrigued. A second later, the pair grabbed Sai and raced out of the room.

The Sensei seemed rather eccentric so far…surely they wouldn't put Minato with Kakashi? Right? As a jinchuuriki, they had

to assign him to someone with adequate sealing ability. Kakashi was on that list, but would they really do that?

"Am I late?"

Minato sighed in relief as Uchiha Shisui appeared at the door, wearing a standard jounin's uniform looking rather relaxed. When the jounin scanned the room, he grinned and winked in his direction, confirming his suspicions.

Shisui trained with Jiraiya. Alright, I can work with that.

Speak for yourself. We got an Uchiha as a Sensei.

I thought you liked Shisui.

Like and tolerate have different meanings.

Oh Kurama. What am I going to do with you?

"No, you're right on time," Iruka said. "Uchiha Shisui has Team 12 consisting of Uchiha Sasuke, Senju Minato, and Nara Shikamaru."

"Troublesome." Shikamaru stood up and stretched. "Wasn't expecting to get stuck with an Uchiha."

"Come on."

Minato followed as Sasuke led them to where Shisui was standing exchanging pleasantries with Iruka.

Well, that's weird. Sasuke isn't in a bad mood anymore. Must not be worried about assignments anymore.

"Alright you three, follow me."

Ten minutes later, Minato was kneeling between Sasuke and Shikamaru, watching Shisui handed each of them a bento and chopsticks.

"Thank you, Shisui-sensei," Minato said, Shikamaru tossing out his own mumbled "thanks," while Sasuke mulishly grunted out a very Uchiha rendition of gratitude.

Minato had interacted with Shisui only a handful of times in the last few years. Not unlike Jiraiya, the Uchiha spent prolonged

periods of time away from Konoha. Minato could only assume that Shisui had returned with many more skills under his belt and a repertoire of abilities that Minato could only benefit from learning.

Shisui embodied the Will of Fire and all that it stood for, whatever else he had become over the years was unimportant.

"Alright, so technically you all know who I am, but adhering to tradition can be beneficial, so I'll introduce myself first," Shisui explained methodically, as he set aside his empty lunch kit. "My name is Uchiha Shisui, I was apprenticed to Jiraiya of the Sannin for four years. After I returned, I spent some time working in the village, but I'm often sent on long-term missions outside of Konoha. I enjoy dancing, training, writing, and spending time with people I care about. I dislike traitors and gardening. My dream for the future is to help the three of you become jounin, get married to a yet-to-be-determined amazing person, and to do whatever is necessary to protect Konohagakure no Sato and all within it."

He wants to help us reach jounin? That is an odd thing for a sensei to say. What an awesome guy though. I really lucked out in the team department too.

If you start fangirling, I'm going to give you a taste of Shukaku's medicine. And don't mess with me because your sleep deprivation is my entertainment!

Oh, please! That's hardly a threat! No one loves sleep more than you do!

Hero worshipping is stupid and I'm not going to put up with you doing it!

I wasn't!

What an awesome guy?

….

That's what I thought.

"Now, let's see…" Shisui reached out and flicked Minato between the eyes.

"Sensei! What was that for?!"

"Looked like your head was in the clouds there, Little Silver! If I'd been an enemy, you would have been in trouble."

That was…unfortunately rather true.

"Okay then, I'm Senju Minato. I live with Tsunade when Kakashi is on missions, but otherwise I live with my Nii-san. I enjoy working on my fuinjutsu, spending time with my friends, reading, and training. I dislike people who judge books only by their covers and those that abandon their comrades. My dream is to grow strong enough to protect the people that are precious to me."

"Good start! Glad to see you haven't changed too much since I saw you last," Shisui winked and Minato rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Alright, Sasuke you're up."

"…fine. I'm Uchiha Sasuke. All of you are aware of my living situation. I enjoy spending time with my friends and training. I dislike Kumogakure, fangirls, and people that waste my time. My dream is to become a shinobi my father would have been proud of," Minato frowned as Sasuke paused, before adding. "And to keep the few people I truly care for safe."

Minato helplessly chewed his lip, saw Shisui only nod thoughtfully, while Shikamaru looked like he'd sucked a lemon.

"Not bad, not bad," Shisui remarked coolly, turning a speculative gaze toward Shikamaru. "Now, Shikamaru, better have you go before you take a nap in your bento."

Shikamaru sighed, shoved the partially eaten meal to the side and folded his arms.

"My name is Nara Shikamaru. I live with my parents. I like sleeping, looking at clouds, and spending time with my friends, even if they're definitely too troublesome. I dislike running…and my dream is…I guess to retire young and marry someone that doesn't nag or try to change me."

"Interesting," Shisui leans forward, chin balanced on his palm and grinned. "I have some fun news for you three."

Ah, here it comes.

"What?" Sasuke demanded in a clipped, irritated tone.

"You're not genin until after you pass a jounin sensei's test," Shisui smirked.

"What?!"

Minato jumped, swivelling to look at Sasuke who had the beginnings of killing intent pouring off him. Going on instinct, he reached over and squeezed Sasuke's arm gently. The other boy stiffened before relaxing marginally and lowered his voice to a low growl.

"Itachi never mentioned a test."

"Of course, not," Shikamaru muttered, sounding not, well, *happy*, but earned another notch of Minato's respect by keeping his composure. "Whatever sort of *test* this is, wouldn't be effective if you knew about them. Not only would your ability at deception have to be dramatically better than it currently is, but I never took you as the type that *relied* on cheating, Sasuke."

"I don't," Sasuke growled with a reinvigorated resolve.

"Good, because Shisui-sensei could be anticipating your reaction and manipulating us already. So quit being so predictable."

More than you know, Shikamaru.

Minato blinked as Kurama forcefully ejected him from the genjutsu, ignoring his furry friend's mutterings. On each side, Sasuke and Shikamaru each broke out of their respective illusions, earning a nod of approval from their sensei.

"As fun as it is to watch all of you react to my little announcement…" Shisui winked at them cheekily. "Let me start by saying that my test is going to be different than what most jounin-sensei will be doing."

This was it then. Minato caught both Shikamaru and Sasuke's attention.

"As a team," Minato declared, looking Shisui dead in the eye.

"As a team." Sasuke echoed.

"Yeah, what they said." Shikamaru sat forward. "Bring it

sensei."

"Huh, well, I've never been a stickler for tradition anyway!" Mirth clung to Shisui's words before the Uchiha broke out into a truly cheesy smile. "That being the case, screw the test. Congratulations! You're officially Team 12!"

Minato spluttered, barely withholding a protest.

"That was rather anti-climatic," Shikamaru looked rather annoyed, while Sasuke's left eye began to twitch.

"From a certain sort of perspective, Shikamaru, but you may feel differently come tomorrow." Shisui said with a glint of something unsettling that promptly had the three of them leaning away from their sensei. "Before we get to that, I feel it's important we have a discussion about our team. Let me ask you why believe you were placed on a team together."

A question leading to introspection, but allowing a sensei to derive quite a bit of information from their responses. An unusual tactic, but Minato could definitely see the implications.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru's face was scrunched up like a raisin. "The team assignments were rather unbalanced. I'm going to go ahead and say this is a political move for the village."

"Not an unreasonable conclusion," Shisui shrugged. "Go ahead and elaborate."

"If you get it, why bother explaining?"

"Humor me." Shisui quipped patiently.

"Eh…it's pretty obvious, isn't it? We have a Senju, an Uchiha, and me. A Senju might not have been a big deal, except Minato is ostensibly the *last* Senju. While a final member of a clan already has value, the Senju being the founders of Konoha is a point of pride for the village.

"Then we have an Uchiha with arguably the most powerful dojutsu in Konoha. And not just any Uchiha, but the brother to the Hokage's apprentice. Anyone with half a brain can piece together that connection's importance.

"And I guess…that leaves me. On paper, I'm unimportant,

but my father is an influential figure that appears in all Bingo Books and is the Jounin Commander of Konoha. Therefore, there will be troublesome people interested in all of us.

"Basically, as a consequence of losing the genetic lottery, people have unreasonably troublesome expectations of all of us."

"So we're all potential targets," Sasuke murmured, looking disgusted by the notion. "Well, I say let them try. We won't come quietly."

"None of you will be easy pickings. I'll make sure of that," Shisui broke into the discussion. "But we can have *that* particular discussion later. Shikamaru, please wrap up your team analysis."

"Was hoping you'd be happy with that," Shikamaru grumbled, but sat up and resumed his explanation. "Our team placement also works from a bizarre, but realistic tactical position. Sasuke engages enemies in close combat, Minato takes them out from close to mid-range, and I restrain or distract from a distance. Sensei learning from a Sannin means he's probably suitable for most roles anyway so he can do whatever. We balance out fairly well. I could have explained more in-depth, but I don't really feel like it."

Minato stared in disbelief as Shikamaru yawned, locked his hands behind his head, and flopped backward to glower balefully at the clouds as if even the sky had wronged him somehow.

"That was rather insightful," Shisui clapped his hands in light praise. "Now whose up now…how about, Sasuke?"

"Fine. Before graduating, I noticed our classes were being observed. Specifically, classes focusing on team exercises. I'm assuming they were trying to determine who worked best together." Minato watched Sasuke pause, angling his face toward the dirt. "I'm difficult to work with. Unlike Minato, I don't have patience for people who don't learn quickly and I'm not as tolerant as Nara when it comes to listening to others prattle on and on. I know that placing myself on a team with shinobi I don't get along with would likely have caused a rift in the team and been a blow to any teamwork. Therefore, I think it's fairly telling that I was placed with the two individuals I respect the most from my class."

"Can't believe that just came out of your mouth," Shikamaru said with respect shining from his face. "Not bad, Uchiha."

"Sasuke…that was…insightful. And I am so, so proud of you."

His friend ducked his head down, his ears turning pink but he seemed to overcome his embarrassment because he sat up straight and continued speaking with renewed confidence.

"I also think it's possible that our elemental affinities were taken into consideration. I know most of the graduating class doesn't use elemental jutsu and probably won't for a while, but Minato and I do. Shikamaru might not use any yet, but I know that Nara is a genius under that laziness so the potential must be there. When they tested us, I remember that Nara had a doton affinity, Minato uses raiton and suiton, while I use raiton and katon. With that spread of elemental talent, I believe the three of us may be able to construction some combination techniques that will work well together.

That was…not at all what Minato had expected. In all honesty, he was rather impressed by the level of insight that Sasuke had demonstrated. Collaboration jutsu? Not at all what Minato had envisioned, but it was a fantastic idea and certainly a good source of teamwork.

"Sasuke, that was very impressive."

Minato had never seen a bashful Uchiha before. The proof was before his eyes, red in the face, and fiddling with his sandal strap.

Damn. He blew me out of the park there. Sasuke's got an impressive head on those shoulders. It's not that I never noticed, but sometimes it's easy to forget. Blinded by how close I am and all that.

Uchiha prodigies. Probably all the inbreeding.

KURAMA!

You know I'm right. Keep in in the clan, right?

For Sage's sake! How did you get to be so ornery, Kurama?

Probably being sealed. It kinda blows even if I like you.

I'm sorry! Seriously! Are you ever going to let me live that down?

Nope.

That's pretty much what I expected.

"I have to agree with Minato-kun." Shisui beamed down with pride at his younger relative. "I guess Itachi isn't the only genius in your house, brat!"

"You guys are going to overinflate that ego of his," Shikamaru remarked, dodging an incoming swipe from a flush-faced Sasuke. "See? He's all embarrassed now."

Sensing a brawl about to break out, Minato rushed to offer his perspective.

"Truthfully sensei, I think Shikamaru and Sasuke covered most of the important things. But the one aspect of our team that neither of them considered is that our team may face additional hostilities because of me."

Minato ignored the way his friends suddenly snapped to attention.

"Why would it matter?" Sasuke snarled dangerously. "You're a jinchuuriki…so what."

"And that's the point," Shikamaru was upright again, though he looked no happier than Sasuke. "I heard that it's common for other villages to kidnap people like Minato. For example, if a team from Kumo met up with us outside the village, they would likely try to eliminate the team and take Minato."

Minato jerked around to look at Shikamaru, giving him a look that clearly suggested he thought the other boy was nuts.

"I'd like to see them try!" Sasuke slammed a kunai into the ground. "Minato's my best friend."

"And that's the point, Sasuke," Shikamaru rolled his eyes, but his voice had softened. "Because we're Minato's friends, we won't resent him for any extra danger."

"I appreciate it, guys, but have a little faith in me too," Minato tried to lighten the dampened mood from his brooding teammates.

"Yeah, I'm pretty glad I didn't try the test Jiraiya-Sensei is giving your friends," Shisui grimaced. "You three are a little too

bloodthirsty and I'm not sure I would have survived a combined assault."

"Some Jounin you are," Sasuke grumbled.

"You wound me!" Shisui squacked dramatically. "But let's move on."

"To what?" Minato asked curiously.

"Minato, give me your strengths and weaknesses. Go!"

"I'm okay with seals," Minato attempted a little humility; the sniggering from Shikamaru and the mutterings about "obsessed genius" rather undermined that. "Alright, *fine*, I love working with seals and I'm rather good for my age. Ninjutsu is probably my strongest skillset. Suiton comes naturally to me and I can use a few jutsu. My raiton manipulation is not very advanced. To be honest, I could use some assistance, but my brother has not been as helpful as I would like. My taijutsu forms are clean, but I need to increase my speed. My chakra control is fair and my medical knowledge is above average. I can perform basic healing techniques, but my reserves are too vast for the precision control necessary for surgical level techniques. I am working on a sealing matrix that may allow me to perform those skills at some point, but so far, I'm limited to basic healing. I have a chokuto, but I'm truly a novice when it comes to kenjutsu. Genjutsu isn't my forte, but I'm excellent with detecting and dispelling them. I'm resistant to most poisons thanks to being dosed by my family members repeatedly. Additionally, I have the otter summoning contract."

"Tch, you're such a pain, Minato," Shikamaru said.

"If you don't like it, quit slacking off, Shikamaru," Sasuke defended seamlessly.

"Meh. I know I have a doton affinity. Never bothered trying to learn any jutsu though." Shikamaru sat up looking strangely focused. "Because of my friends nagging and stupid graduation requirements, my chakra control is pretty good. I have smaller chakra reserves than these two monsters." Shikamaru points at his friends casually. "So, that's definitely a weak point for me. I can use the basic weaponry, but it isn't excessive. I've managed to increase the speed of my Kage jutsu, but there is still significant improvement I need to make. Physically, I'm in good shape for a graduate, but I consistently lose in taijutsu matches to most people. I can use the basic healing

techniques, but like Minato, I don't really enjoy medicine. Genjutsu is pretty easy to recognize and dispel since I have smaller reserves anyway. My best asset is my ability to analyze combat situations, while my physical abilities are probably my weakest points."

"Alright," Shisui acknowledged easily, before turning pointedly toward his cousin. "And you, Sasuke?"

"I thought you got our academy reports," Sasuke pointed out shrewdly.

"Reports don't tell me what *you* think your strengths and weaknesses are."

Sasuke straightened, suddenly looking slightly more considering, possibly even respectful.

"My kenjutsu skills are coming along well, but I need advanced training from a specialist if I don't want to plateau. As it stands, my physical training and stamina are solid. I definitely feel that my dexterity trumps my strength in a fight. My taijutsu is good, especially with my Sharingan, but…" Sasuke tapered off, looking angry before it was smothered by a glimmer of determination as he stared down Shisui. "Itachi is coddling me. I need someone who can push my limits and help me to get better.

"I have that problem as well," Minato interrupted abruptly. "Kakashi and to a lesser extent, Tsunade seem hesitant to help me grow."

"If that's really how it is, I can tell you that my Kaa-san is a royal pain, but Tou-san enables me to slack off. I guess you could say I'm allowed to go at my own pace," Shikamaru mumbled. "Not that I want to work harder, but for the sake of honesty."

There was a certain sort of merit to what they were saying. Something Minato had come to understand as an adult, but only from an empathetic perspective. Truly, he had a better understanding now.

"Now you know why direct family members are barred from teaching their children," Shisui smiled wryly. "I'm pleased that you all acknowledged the need for help. I actually didn't expect any of you, let alone all three of you to do so this soon."

"Whatever," Sasuke grumbled. "Let's just get this over with. I can use genjutsu, but I'm better with ninjutsu. My chakra reserves

are above average and my chakra control is good, but could stand to be improved."

"All of you expressed strengths and weaknesses, which is what I was hoping to hear." Shisui beamed. "In the coming days, we will discuss personal goals, but for now, I'm giving you all the afternoon off. Just make sure to meet back here tomorrow morning at seven, bright and early with everything you think you'll need for training."

"Why does this sound like some sort of trick?" Shikamaru drawled.

Minato shivered as Shisui quirked a single brow.

"I'll see you all bright and early, Team 12."

In a flash, Shisui poofed away.

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As his sensei disappeared, Sasuke felt the invisible weight crushing him, lift.

Uchiha Shisui was his jounin-sensei. That was…a relief. All those sleepless nights worrying about who would be in charge of his training and future seemed stupid now. Itachi had tried to reassure him, but Sasuke hadn't been so easily consoled. Itachi had influence, but he wasn't the Hokage yet. The old man could easily have tried to match him with someone unreliable like…Kakashi or worse, that crazy man in green that Itachi had trained with. As hard as it had been to accept, Sasuke was aware that Shisui was one of the best that Konoha had to offer. Training with him would be an honor, even if he would never admit that out loud.

Looking to where Minato and Shikamaru were quietly talking, Sasuke felt relieved. Naruto and Sasuke had stayed up so many nights discussing potential teams. Naruto had his preferences, but hadn't shared the same fears that Sasuke felt.

There may be a large group of 'friends' that he socialized with, but within that number, only a select few were people Sasuke could tolerate spending excessive amounts of time with. He had presumed that he would be unfortunate and end up with at least one person outside his preferences. To that end, Sasuke's list had begun
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and ended with Minato.

Not only was the Senju a powerhouse that motivated Sasuke to train harder and faster, but the competition was friendly and lacked the frustration he felt when he trained with Naruto.

Minato's personality was just…comforting. Like a warm blanket after a cold day. Every fault, every flaw that Sasuke presented was treated with acceptance, with a lack of judgment that Sasuke had only very recently begun to appreciate.

The cold truth was, there was just something about Minato. Something that made him special. Something Sasuke wasn't prepared to put into words.

To that end, Sasuke refused to consider a team that didn't have his best friend on it. That had left one space to brood over.

As much as he loved Naruto, being confined to a genin team would put strain on their relationship. As a sibling he loved Naruto, but by the end of the day Sasuke invariably wanted to put his fist in that moron's loud mouth—had done a few times, much to his Kaa-san's frustration. In the short, Naruto being on his team spelled out disaster from beginning to end.

Sakura had the capacity for intellectual conversation, but had recently started blushing and watching himself *and* Minato with wide doe eyes. As far as Sasuke was concerned, potential fangirls were deal breakers.

Ino was…tolerable. Mostly. Better than Sakura, that loudmouth Kiba, or Naruto. Ino scraped past with a marginally acceptable.

Chouji…Sasuke wasn't sure. Of the two of them, Sasuke possessed the stronger personality, which suggested the two of them would not conflict, but still…not who Sasuke would pick.

Sai was…weird. Probably fine. Still likely to get on his nerves. But someone Sasuke could tolerate.

Shikamaru was acceptable to him. Intellect was something Sasuke could respect, while physical ability could be stimulated by a determined sensei. Shikamaru didn't grate on Sasuke's nerves. Not the way almost everyone else did.

In truth, Sasuke had hit the jackpot. Good sensei with an even better team.

Hyperaware of his companions, he watched Minato shift his weight the way his friend did when he had far too much pent-up energy but was doing his best to refrain from acting.

“You want to spar before we head home?”

“You spar.” Shikamaru hopped to his feet nimbly and stretched his arms. “I’ll watch.”

In quiet agreement, Sasuke was on his feet and extending a hand to his friend. Sasuke refused to acknowledge the flutter in his chest when Minato accepted the hand up.

With practiced ease, Sasuke settled into a defensive position. A moment passed, Minato blitzed forward. Sasuke spun and attempted to catch his friend’s arm.Minato danced backward, chin tilted upward, and looked like a beckoning demon with those sparkling scarlet eyes and—

Sasuke somersaulted forward, planted his palms on the ground, and aimed his heel for Minato’s jaw.

Minato dodged.

Feeling lighter than he had in ages, Sasuke lunged forward as if he were weightless. Sasuke threw himself forward with a barrage of precise strikes. Minato simply reacted; twisting out of the way, vaulting overhead, launching a counter that sent Sasuke on the defensive for a time.

Back and forth they waged their taijutsu duel. By unspoken agreement they refrained from jutsu and weaponry, sticking only to taijutsu.

By the time Shikamaru stepped forward to disrupt their spar, Sasuke was exhausted, but reluctant to concede. Minato looked equally tired with a sheen of sweat on his skin, panting for breath, but an elated grin.

“You’re both ridiculous. You know that right.”

“Maybe,” Minato laughed, tugging out a pair of water bottles and tossing one to Sasuke with a wink. “I don’t know about

Sasuke, but I feel pretty good. Exams were a little bit nerve wracking!"

"You weren't nervous about the exams," Sasuke argued, taking a long, welcome drink of water. "You've been just as ready as I have to take those stupid things."

"I always worry!"

That was true. Minato was the number one mother hen of the group. Not that Sasuke would ever say it to his face.

"We better get going," Shikamaru muttered. "It's getting late and I got a bad feeling about tomorrow."

"It's not that late, Shika," Minato said teasingly. "I bet you just want to nap."

"That too, but I'm not looking forward to tomorrow," Shikamaru groaned miserably. "Sensei has something planned."

"I think you're right." Minato grinned broadly. "But maybe we should hunt down our friends first? Hear how things went?"

"Yeah, alright," Shikamaru replied with a long-suffering sigh. "But let's make it quick."

"Sasuke?" Minato paused, looked back toward him with a slight frown. "You coming?"

"Yeah."

Sasuke surprised himself, striding forward with a purpose. Allowing instinct to guide him, he slung an arm around each of his friends' shoulders.

"Let's go."

Sasuke was more than aware they were both studying him, but he merely smirked and strode forward with his comrades each falling into step with him.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap! Typing when you have two broken fingers is ridiculous! But, I was determined to get this chapter out. I'm not happy with everything, but I'm happy with most of it. I think. UGH!

End Notes

I've been blessed with fanart gifts from two wonderful people! I encourage you all to take a look!

Samsara: http://samsararen.deviantart.com/art/By-The-Will-of-Fire-657634497
Datura: https://www.dropbox.com/s/t7g65ctd6iwkisv/20170806_225754.jpg?dl=0

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